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# *pastmodern Screen*





# INTRODUCTION

I. The reasons for postmodern theory's ascendancy in anglophone culture are numerous and complex. One principal factor concerns the decelerating development of new critical theory in the '80s. Where the late '60s and '70s were heady days when Althusserian Marxism, semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminism rapidly cross-fertilised and cross-theorised to produce the current amalgam of Western academic film studies, the '80s have seen a period of theoretical refinement only substantially inflected by theorisations of sexuality and ethnicity. In film studies, certainly, interest in contemporary work has declined in favour of more tranquil theorisations of history, an area where dominant critical paradigms are less troubled by the 'aberrant' stylistic developments of contemporary cinema. (Indeed for a number of film theoreticians it increasingly seems that 'there are no songs like the old songs' – at least when it comes to analysis. . . .)

On the surface of critical theory, whose purely academic concerns were less trammelled by the enduring political commitment of the pioneers

of the '70s, the early '80s was a time when the old motors of theoretical succession were running down. With Althusserian Marxism bracketed as too rigidly determinist, psychoanalysis out of fashion and feminism both legitimated and fragmented, theorists were on the lookout for new perspectives. Throughout the late '70s and early '80s numerous gurus drifted across the stage with little or no lasting impact. However important Foucault's perspectives, his work did not lend itself to easy assimilation as a critical system, nor did the once promising school of Deconstructionists offer anything more tangible to media criticism than a witty playfulness whose self-delight often obscured analysis. The diminishing impact of new theoretical developments coincided with a number of other cultural factors (e.g. the apparent exhaustion of the modernist movement in fine art) and the Western 'retreat from politics', to grant postmodernist critiques of theoretical paradigms a resonance which was at the very least *disconcerting*.

The key figure in popularising postmodernism in anglophone culture was Jean Baudrillard,

first introduced into English in the early '80s in the pages of US and Australian journals like *Art and Text*, *Semiotext(e)* and *ZG*. His work had been familiar to sections of the French intelligentsia from the mid-'70s without anything like the dramatic effect it was to have on cultural studies in Australia, North America and, finally, Britain. Its relation to an already established politico-philosophical tradition, that of Situationism, made it appear far less radical to French readers. Baudrillard may have written in a markedly different literary style to that of other contemporary theorists (showing an intense post-Derridean *literariness* and a penchant for developing arguments through metaphors), but his concerns re-worked themes already elaborated by the Situationists (who went on record to disown his 'perversion' of their theory<sup>1</sup>). Situationist manifestos such as Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*<sup>2</sup> and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*<sup>3</sup> had in the late '60s elaborated a theory of the decline of 'organic' social relations in contemporary Western culture brought about by the development of a particularly concentrated form of advanced capitalism which in turn resulted in an intensification of cultural commodification and a resultant 'society of the spectacle'. Similarly, many of the blatant departures from Marxism apparent in Baudrillard's work were partially prefigured (and thereby rendered more opaque) by the particularly *outré* style of complex and self-reflexive analysis developed by theorists such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean-François Lyotard<sup>4</sup>.

Following the gradual popularisation of Baudrillard's writing in the early '80s, his work and the issues raised rapidly assumed academic prominence in North America and Australia during 1983-4 with the English language publication of a number of key titles including Baudrillard's *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*<sup>5</sup> and Hal Foster's anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic*<sup>6</sup>. But although *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* was available in Britain in the Autumn of 1983, it was the publication of Fredric Jameson's essay 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in *New Left Review*<sup>7</sup> the following Summer which belatedly legitimated postmodernism as an object of British left academic analysis.

Meanwhile, developments outside the field of cultural theory also gave an impetus to the post-modernist critique. Prominent among these was the arrival of forms of cultural production which appeared to require analyses not premised on established modernist perspectives. Where the Situationists had applied their notions of a radically new cultural condition to a (Western) world which, though flush with the fruits of consumerism, was still in the grip of 'traditional' twentieth century forms of mass media and a still apparently fertile modernism in the fields of art, architecture and cinema, by the early '80s the cultural map had changed. The heyday of the modernist film had faded, more elusive styles of video (such as the ubiquitous Scratch) had blossomed and the electronic mass media had proliferated like never before, with a plethora of VDU systems and home recorders saturating the social with networks of electronic images. But it was the field of architecture which first enunciated a theoretical principle of postmodernism and took it to its bosom.

As early as 1966 Robert Venturi rejected the dominant orthodoxy of modern architecture (as derived from the influence of Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe), in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*<sup>8</sup>, a work which

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Jaime Semprun, *Précis de la Récupération*, Paris, Chants Libre, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris, Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage de jeunes générations*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Both Castoriadis and Lyotard diverged from mainstream Western Marxism following their involvement with the Socialisme ou Barbarie group during the '50s and early '60s. See Castoriadis' five-part article 'Marxism and Revolutionary Theory' in the last five issues of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (issues 36-40, April-June 1964 to June-August 1965) and Lyotard's works on aesthetics and philosophy such as *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Paris, UGE, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend, Wash, (USA), Bay Press, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> *New Left Review* no 146, July-August 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966.



4 called for a new style which could embrace the forms and principles of both classicism and vernacular styles. By the early 1980s major civic commissions such as the Portland building in Oregon confirmed postmodernism as a phenomenon of cultural production as well as theory.

Despite their enthusiasm for succeeding waves of theory in the '70s, British academics were notably inhospitable to postmodernism in the '80s. With hindsight this may be attributed to a prudent scepticism, but it also reflected the substantial institutional investment in dominant theoretical paradigms. (A certain section of North American academia responded with more enthusiasm. Much of this engagement and absorption was, however, predominantly recuperative in the tradition of Jonathan Culler's integration of structuralism within New Criticism<sup>9</sup>. This approach is typified by works such as John Fekete's *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*<sup>10</sup>, which incorporates essays on Baudrillard and Castoriadis along with pieces on Saussure, Barthes and Wittgenstein in the same anti-foundationalist paradigm.) In Britain, it wasn't until 1985 that the first significant signs of any major engagement with the theory began to publicly manifest themselves via a weekend conference on postmodernism organised by London's Institute of Contemporary Arts and the subsequent publication of a dossier based on the proceedings<sup>11</sup>. But even this high-profile 'launch' in the presence of such eminent theorists as Lyotard himself failed to stimulate a broad cultural debate.

In part this was due to the actual tedium of the event, which combined lengthy pauses for translation with a virtual all-male speakers list, whose presentations were either extraordinarily arcane or simplified diagnostic applications of theory to specific cultural practices. But the similar lack of engagement with the provocative responses to Jameson published in the pages of *New Left Review* during 1984/5<sup>12</sup> suggests deeper factors at work. One of these was undoubtedly the dearth of 'converts' to postmodernism among British cultural theorists<sup>13</sup>, with a pronounced reluctance on the part of subject specialists and specialist journals to debate the issues involved in postmodernism outside their specific subject

applications – a somewhat strange development given both the previous decade's readiness to mix theories and disciplines and the current trend away from subject-specific academic work in favour of more general cultural considerations. Much of the (minimal) work on postmodern theory developed in Britain has taken place in (relative) isolation from parallel studies (let alone the far more developed analysis already advanced in journals such as *New German Critique*<sup>14</sup>) and has therefore not formed anything like the general theoretical project, a factor which the uncharitable may construe as further evidence for that very charge of theoretical parochialism which much recent British critical work has been keen to refute.

II. A reading of postmodern theory through the lens of film studies is striking in several senses. Firstly, perhaps, after the sort of cinematically specific textual analyses which still dominate the material submitted to *Screen*, the ease with which postmodern theory leaps from medium to medium is not a little worrying in its audacity. In the wake of considerable debate about the applicability of film theory to television studies the return to such a multi-media cocktail demands serious consideration. Secondly, at the conjunctural level, there seem problems with the periodisation of postmodernism, though once again perhaps these problems are specific to the mass

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> John Fekete (ed), *The Structural Allegory – Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> *ICA Documents 5: Postmodernism*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> See Dan Latimer 'Jameson and Postmodernism' in *New Left Review* no 148, November/December 1984; and Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' *New Left Review* no 152, July/August 1985.

<sup>13</sup> See, however, Carl Gardner's account of his personal conversion in *Camera/Work* no 32, Summer 1985, and Dick Hebdige, 'The Bottom Line on Planet One', *Ten-8*, no 19, 1985, p 41.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance the 'Modernity and Postmodernity' issue, *New German Critique* no 33, Fall 1984.

media. It is all very well identifying a stylistic phase in a specific medium as postmodern if there is some kind of agreement about a prior (or even simultaneous) period which could be usefully and consensually considered to be modern. Where no such agreement exists, however, there seems to be a convenient critical slippage back and forth between postmodernism as a set of stylistic phenomena and postmodernism as a socio-economic phase. (The very 'postness' of 'post-modernism' seems suspiciously inappropriate when one remembers Lyotard's own assault on the very notion of 'progress' – and not just aesthetic progress – as it has been historically associated with modernism.)

In left writing on film and television the seminal text on postmodernism in English remains Fredric Jameson's pioneering essay<sup>15</sup>. Indeed Jameson's role in stimulating the British left's interest in postmodernism should not be underestimated since he was perhaps the first critic writing in English to propose a homology between the cultural form of postmodernism, its stylistic superstructure, and its economic base. While Jameson's central concern was clearly not with the audi-visual media (most of his examples are drawn not from film and television but from literature and architecture) his conclusions continue to exercise an undeniable influence on attempts to theorise both the postmodern media industries and their products. This raises a primary problem, for Jameson's work – and indeed that of those European philosophers on whose thinking he draws – is often unspecific about the precise applicability of the term to different media and to particular historical moments.

But if the notion of periodisation proposed by postmodernism is a problematic one, so too is the hypothesis of the relation, within that period, of 'superstructural' stylistic phenomena with those of a postmodern socio-economic base. For instance, Jameson's explanation of architecture's central role in postmodernism as a consequence of the medium's status as the art 'closest constitutively to the economic . . . with which it has a virtually unmediated relationship', begs as many questions as it answers about that allegedly minimal mediation. (Furthermore, Jameson's relative marginalisation of film and complete 'forgetting' of television in this

formulation – both of which are at least as close to the economic at the level of investments – can only reinforce a suspicion, voiced in this issue by James Collins and Richard Allen among others, that too much of the resistance to postmodern culture is simply a revamped cultural pessimism.)

Certainly, this explanation is encouraged by Jameson's subsequent description of postmodernism as 'the end of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke (as symbolised by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction)'. This diagnosis is curious in the light of Jameson's quotation of Guy Debord's oft-cited remark that 'the image has become the final form of commodity reification'.<sup>16</sup> When Susan Boyd-Bowman refers in this issue to televisual postmodernism as an avant-garde ransacking of the image archives, it is important to remember that image archives were indeed commodified at an escalating rate by the internationalisation and deregulation of the broadcast market in the 1980s. Nevertheless, as Collins points out in his article, Jameson seems here to be mourning not modernism as such but a modernism seen through a vestigial romanticism. Perhaps if we follow Jameson's argument about the homology between late capital and cultural postmodernism but reject his collapsing of what might be seen as non-synchronic and indeed media specific conjunctural moments, we may be better equipped to adjudicate the utility of the postmodernist thesis.

The problem of defining postmodernism is or should be primary – the blurring of boundaries between stylistic phenomena on the one hand and a socio-economic phase on the other continue to confuse. The media of film and television and to a lesser extent video are by no means institutionally or aesthetically synchronised – nor indeed are they necessarily in historical harmony, as it were, with other media, nor even (in

<sup>15</sup>Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *op cit*.

<sup>16</sup>Guy Debord, quoted in Fredric Jameson, *ibid*, p 66. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Practical Paradise Publications, London 1977.

6 the sense of investment patterns, modes of production, commodity markets and so on) with the socio-economic conjuncture which Jameson calls late capitalism and in relation to which he seems to conceive of postmodernism as some kind of homology, reflection or cultural accompaniment. One quite crude illustration of this is the existence of such recent films-of-the-book as *Ragtime*, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and *The Name of the Rose*. As literary texts all of these have been described as postmodern, as films it would be hard to argue that any of them retain even residual characteristics at a textual level, but as commodities they clearly fit much better into Jameson's thesis (in the sub-genre of international art film).

Furthermore, Jameson, following Lyotard and others, writes as if the characteristics he is identifying (at both the textual and socio-economic contextual levels) have never been diagnosed before and require a new term to describe them. However, Susan Sontag's 1964 definition of Camp as 'a sensibility that . . . converts the serious into the frivolous', that privileges 'style at the expense of content' and 'sees everything in quotation marks' is at the very least an interesting precursor. For Sontag, 'the camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken' and 'camp taste is . . . only possible in affluent societies'. She observes that pop art punctuated the shift from modernism to postmodernism by injecting mass cultural artefacts and imagery into high art<sup>17</sup> – a formulation remarkably similar to those now familiarly associated with theorists of postmodernity, from Jameson to Eco, from Lyotard to Jencks.

Only one essay in this issue is directed at a specific text which it designates as postmodern – Patricia Mellencamp's article on *The Man Who Envied Women*. Mellencamp notes that while 'postmodernism devours everything, is stuffed full of art and interpretation like . . . Harpo's baggy coat, it is also an emptied byword, without definition or limits.' Mellencamp attributes to Rainer's film such postmodern textual characteristics as a breakdown and blending of categories like art, genre and media, high art and pop culture, authorship, quotation, pastiche. Having carefully identified the 'postmodern'

surface of *The Man Who Envied Women*, however, she does not attempt to address the specifics of the socio-economic conjuncture in which Yvonne Rainer's film was made.

Susan Boyd-Bowman's article on INA, on the other hand, succeeds in sketching both the shifting textual practices and socio-economic contextual structures of French television's L'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel over a ten-year period. In that decade, Boyd-Bowman suggests, 'INA has traversed a shift from modernist to postmodernist practice in broadcasting.' INA was also responsible, of course, for occasionally commissioning such modernist (?) film-makers as Godard and Ruiz. Less explicitly, John Roberts' discussion of the Channel 4 series *State of the Art* also constructs a televisual teleology of arts programming from the author-foregrounding great artist/great presenter series associated with Kenneth Clark and Robert Hughes to the etiolated editorial/presentational form of the postmodern. Roberts also refers to the pre-modernist 'realism' of television's self-definition, the window-on-the-world ideology which he calls 'the transmission problem'. Roberts is critical of the naturalising discourse of much arts coverage on television, but resists the alternative adopted both by critics like Baudrillard and programmes like *State of the Art* which he calls a 'glossing over of differences'. Lawrence Grossberg, in an article on American television and postmodernism takes this 'in-difference' as its focus and echoes both Collins and Roberts in concluding that 'Increasingly, reading Baudrillard is no different than watching *Miami Vice* – nothing breaks the slippery surface.'

For Jameson, postmodernism is the 'cultural dominant' of the 1980s because the innovations of modernism have become over-familiar: 'Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly they now strike us, on the whole, as rather realistic.'<sup>18</sup> As James Collins puts it in his article here, Jameson's formulation of the postmodern as a 'cultural dominant' conceals the question 'dominant for whom'; Collins also criticises the Baudrillard

<sup>17</sup>Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' in *Against Interpretation*, New York, Laurel, 1969.

<sup>18</sup>Fredric Jameson, op cit, p 56.

tactic of unproblematically distinguishing himself from the discursive 'entrapment' of the masses in the meshes of postmodern simulation. It seems crucial to deconstruct not only this elitism but also, and perhaps more importantly, Jameson's 'us'; as Fred Pfeil has argued elsewhere, postmodernism if it can be said to be anyone's culture at all, is probably that of the professional managerial middle class.<sup>19</sup> This demographic slice may well coincide with some of Jameson's readers (the baby boom generation and class fraction in professional occupations aged between 25 and 35 in 1980) but is far from equivalent with the rest of the population. Barbara Creed's article in this volume on feminism and postmodernism pursues this point by posing questions about gender which Jameson ignores. As Creed puts it, 'Is feminism a symptom or a result of the postmodern condition or is feminism linked more directly to this crisis in theory?' In response to Jameson's consideration of *la mode rétro* Creed asks whether the fascination he identifies with nostalgia in contemporary texts takes a different form for men than for women. Clearly, in relation to race, ethnicity and First World/Third World relations the area remains open for further inquiry.

There is one school of thought which argues that television is in a sense implicitly postmodernist since it is comprised almost in its entirety of 'quotations' from non-televisual 'readymade' texts – stage plays and parliamentary proceedings, novels and public ceremonies, sporting events and cinematic works – and that it then proceeds to cut them up, slow them down, speed them up and generally rearrange and repeat them in whole or part again and again. Taking a rather different tack, Lawrence Grossberg's essay here identifies television's 'in-difference', 'repetitions' and 'excess' as essentially postmodern characteristics. Much of the discussion of postmodernism and television, however, actually ends up being about non-broadcast video art work. The latter does, of course, occasionally turn up on broadcast television: for example, British series like Channel Four's *Video 1, 2, 3* and *Ghosts in the Machine*, US programmes such as PBS' *Alive From Off-Center* and France's INA.

Only rarely, though, have critics attempted to

adumbrate a postmodernism in broadcast television itself. Part of the problem here seems to be the (structuring) absence of any television modernism at a textual level that a postmodern movement could be seen to challenge or supersede. Gradually, though, examples of what have been described as postmodern programmes have emerged in recent years from pop promos to shows like *Moonlighting* or *Miami Vice* (and its partial progenitor MTV) in the US, not to mention Pam's *Dallas* dream, while in the UK, there has been a vein of semi-plagiarising 'pastiche' in both drama and documentaries – drama serials like *Edge of Darkness* and *The Singing Detective*, *Gangsters* and *Rock Follies* or documentaries like those associated with *Arena* and its offshoots.<sup>20</sup> These programmes exhibit what might be described as an erosion or refusal of that 'real' onto which television was once assumed to be no more than a window. Umberto Eco has characterised the '80s as witnessing a shift from Paleo-TV to Neo-TV. For Eco, Paleo-TV talked about and reconstructed the 'real world' while Neo-TV talks only about the television world<sup>21</sup>: the latter is evidence as much by the guests on a chat show like *Wogan* as it is by the targets of a 'satirical' series like *Spitting Image*.

For Jameson, the cinema of postmodernism is on the one hand the cinema of post-Godardian experimentation and on the other that of the so-called 'nostalgia film', epitomised by *American Graffiti*. In an early version of his piece on postmodernism<sup>22</sup> Jameson added another intriguing cinematic category, that of films like *Star Wars* which, he suggested, functioned as nostalgia films for parents familiar with the cinema serials

<sup>19</sup>Fred Pfeil, 'Makin' Flippy Floppy: Postmodernism and the Baby Boom PMC', in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds), *The Year Left*, London, Verso, 1985.

<sup>20</sup>See John Wyver's 'Television and Postmodernism' in *ICA Documents 5: Postmodernism*, op cit, for a discussion of the British documentary end of the relation. See Jim McGuigan's paper on *Edge of Darkness* presented at the 1986 International Television Studies Conference, London.

<sup>21</sup>See Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to the Neo Television of the 1980's', *Framework* 25, 1984, pp 18-25.

<sup>22</sup>'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Hal Foster (ed), op cit.

8 of the '30s and '40s but could be taken 'straight' by children. This echoes both the idea of double-coding elaborated by Eco and Sontag's definition of camp. Noel Carroll has offered a definition similar to Jameson's, but prefers the term 'allusionism'; indeed, for Carroll, the postmodern cinema is to be found only in the area of the avant-garde.<sup>23</sup>

One explanation for the difficulty of discussing cinema as postmodern derives from the fact that cinema was one of the developments which coincided with and contributed to the advent of modernism in the fine arts. Until relatively recently, at least, the mainstream cinema has been pre-modernist almost by definition (hence the applicability, whatever its crudity, of MacCabe's concept of the classic realist text<sup>24</sup> and the much subtler formulation elaborated by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in their book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*<sup>25</sup>). Briefly, cinema as a mass medium appropriated many of the nineteenth century realist narrative techniques of the novel and the stage; for Bordwell *et al* Hollywood is the cinema's classicism, while the sort of stylistic strategies associated with modernism have only inflected the art cinema and the avant-garde. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* defines the international art cinema as one of authorial expressivity, psychological realism and ambiguity and traces the take-up of these characteristics in the post-classical Holly-

wood of the '60s-'80s. (The relationship between the *auteur* theory and the cult of the director in the '70s Hollywood is one connection here). But the book also carefully distinguishes between the art cinema, the avant-garde cinema and the modernist cinema.

The avant-garde, for Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson is that cinema which rejects narrative causality and replaces it with the spatial and temporal characteristics of film form itself. Modernism in the cinema is thus a kind of halfway house between the devices of art cinema and the avant-garde. If we accept this formulation then it might follow that a postmodern cinema would be another halfway house – that between modernism and Hollywood classicism. In the '50s and '60s much of the momentum of the *nouvelle vague* in general and of Godard's work in particular certainly came out of just such a relation; so too in the '70s and '80s did the new German cinema and the work of Fassbinder. Meanwhile, Hollywood was developing its own 'art cinema'. For Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, two factors keep the new Hollywood from becoming no more than a pastiche of continental art cinema. The first is a conservatism of style which is built into its institutional mode of production; the second is the way in which the conventions of film genre function to assimilate and accommodate the technical tics of modernism within what remains a primarily pre-modernist aesthetic. Like Jameson, the authors refer to Ernest Mandel's analysis of late capitalism, pointing to the ideology of 'omnipotent technology' as characteristic of the new Hollywood. The debate about this pioneering work will undoubtedly continue; the recent release of films as diverse as *Explorers*, *True Stories*, *Ginger and Fred*, *Diva*, *Querelle*, *Sunless*, *Back To The Future*, *Blue Velvet*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Blade Runner*, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, *The Man Who Envied Women* and *Zelig*, should ensure that the debate about postmodernism and the audio-visual media will also.

PHILIP HAYWARD  
PAUL KERR

<sup>23</sup> Noel Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And Beyond)', *October* 20, Spring 1982. On postmodernism and the avant-garde see his chapter on 'Film' in Stanley Trachtenberg (ed), *The Postmodern Moment*, London, Greenwood Press, 1985.

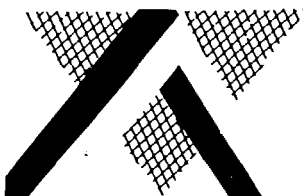
<sup>24</sup> Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema', *Screen* Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, pp 7-24.

<sup>25</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985. For an elaboration of David Bordwell's definition of art cinema see his article 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', in *Film Criticism*, Fall 1979 vol 4 no 1, pp 56-64. See also Barry King's review of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* in *Screen*, November-December 1986, vol 27 no 6, pp 74-88.



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# POSTMODERNISM AND CULTURAL PRACTICE: REDEFINING THE PARAMETERS

BY JAMES COLLINS

FEW ISSUES GENERATE more impassioned critical activity than postmodernism. The majority of attempts to define it as a movement or condition adopt an explicitly negative perspective, often insisting it signals the virtual end of civilisation, or at the very least the final victory of a berserk mass culture over authentic art. But the 'object' that is postmodernism has yet to be convincingly theorised largely because its denigrators rely on antiquated parameters for cultural analysis. We need to re-examine how it is characterised and question the applicability of presuppositions concerning this movement formulated by modernists anxious to rid the world of this new cultural 'Other'. The future of ideological analysis depends on how we come to terms with postmodernism since it problematises so thoroughly our critical assumptions about cultural production and subjectivity.

A thorough consideration of all the various sins attributed to postmodernism is clearly beyond the scope of this article, so I will focus only on those most relevant to media analysis: that within postmodernism meaning has 'imploded' due to our extensive exposure to mass media; that all artistic/ideological differences have become random parts of a 'sheer heterogeneity'; that as commodities film and television programmes necessarily must be rejected as 'inauthentic' representation; that the renewed interest in cultural traditions reflects a reactionary escapism. Re-evaluating these assertions will involve a critical reappraisal of the prejudices informing them. The rejection of postmodernism is based on the same dubious semiotic and ideological grounds that serve as the foundation for the dismissal of 'mass culture' as a whole. I will also adumbrate



the key features of a more productive theory of postmodernist cultures and suggest how it allows us to redefine the terms of ideological analysis.

Postmodernism must be understood as three distinct but intrinsically interrelated elements: as a particular type of textual practice or 'style', as a cultural context, and as a mode of analysis. As for its style, one can easily identify a distinctive *écriture* linking the films of Syberberg, the novels of Puig, and the architecture of Charles Moore – a radical eclecticism built on juxtapositions of conflicting discourses (high art, popular culture, contemporary and historical, etc) where the text becomes a 'site' of intersecting modes of representation. Intensive close analysis of avowedly postmodern texts still needs to be done to delimit more pointedly the differences among early, high, late and post modernisms in various media. This article, however, will concentrate on postmodernism as a cultural context and mode of analysis in order to demonstrate its impact on the production and consumption of all texts in contemporary societies. Rather than trying to promote postmodernism as a new 'dominant' style, I will focus on how, as a context, it throws into question the very notion of 'dominant', thereby profoundly affecting its analysis. In other words, what differentiates postmodernism from earlier periods is that while a specific style may be identifiable, its circulation and popularity do not define what is distinctive about the period; what distinguishes the postmodernist context is the simultaneous presence of that style alongside modernist, pre-modernist, and aggressively non-modernist styles, all enjoying significant degrees of popularity with different audiences and institutions. *Diva* may indeed be a postmodernist detective text, but what individuates the postmodernist context is the appearance of this film on a cable film channel while *The Maltese Falcon*, *Death of an Expert Witness* and *Miami Vice* run on opposing channels the same evening. Where artistic activity within other movements/periods may have been defined by assertion of a particular dominant, the diversity of artistic activity within postmodernism is best defined by a question: dominant for whom?

The ongoing competition among discourses suggests a fundamentally decentred culture without significant cultural orchestration, i.e., the coordination of the function of and audiences for various discourses. Critics of postmodernism consistently conceive of the situation in chaotic, entropic terms revealing just as consistently the use of nineteenth-century, pre-industrial models to describe post-industrial, media-sophisticated cultures. Jean Baudrillard's notion of 'imploded meaning' is a case in point.<sup>1</sup> He insists that the constant bombardment of the individual by so many different sources of information has led to 'the relentless destructuring of the social'. But here Baudrillard confuses decentred activity with pure entropy, as if once coordination and centralisation have faded 'the social' no longer exists. But as Kenneth Roberts<sup>2</sup> and others have argued, the fragmentation of traditional categories of class solidarity results not in entropy, but in realignment along different, specifically twentieth-century lines. Likewise, the fragmentation of traditional hierarchies of fictional discourses has produced considerable realignment, but not cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Implosion of Meaning in the Media and the Information of the Social in the Masses', in Kathleen Woodward (ed), *Myth of Information: Technology and Post-Industrial Culture*, Madison, Coda Press, 1980, pp 137-148.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Roberts et al, *The Fragmentary Class Structure*, London, Heinemann, 1977.

anarchy. Baudrillard insists, 'Whatever its content . . . the objective of information is always to circulate meaning, to *subjugate the masses to meaning*. . . . we are *imprisoned by the system*'<sup>3</sup>. Underlying all of Baudrillard's claims is an Adorno-like combination of paranoia concerning the power of technology and nostalgia for authentic 'social relationships' existing only in the pre-technological age.

The inability of this nostalgic position to account for a decentred, but not entropic, techno-culture becomes clear in Baudrillard's belief that 'the masses . . . do not choose, do not produce differences, but indifference. . . . Yet it is not meaning or the increase of meaning that produces intense pleasure. It is rather its neutralization that fascinates us'<sup>4</sup>. The masses respond to the bombardment of signs 'by reducing all articulate discourse to a single irrational groundless dimension in which signs lose their meaning and subside into exhausted fascination'. Signs may be exhausted for Baudrillard, but are they for everyone? The problem is that 'the masses' for Baudrillard are always a unitary quantity – *they* think this, or *they* believe that as *one* undifferentiated body. The failure to recognise the persistence of belief in differences within the masses is most obvious in Baudrillard's misappropriation of Octave Mannoni's '*je sais bien, mais quand-même*' ('I know, but all the same')<sup>5</sup>. He asserts, 'One both believes it and doesn't believe it at the same time, without questioning it seriously, an attitude that may be summed up in the phrase: "Yes, I know, but all the same"'<sup>6</sup>. For Baudrillard the phrase signifies an intellectual shrug of the shoulders, yet for Mannoni the phrase describes the basis of fetishistic belief which, if anything, means the insistence on differentiation, the denial of neutrality. The basis for fetishistic pleasure is always a specific object, and as such totally refutes Baudrillard's belief that differences are no longer important. The suspension of disbelief or the leap of belief that makes the 'quand-même' possible in a given individual depends upon a specific object or text of desire.

The intensification rather than disappearance of this desire to believe in significant differences within an ever-expanding range of competing alternatives is perhaps best illustrated by recent children's films where the will to believe in 'x' and not 'y' is fetishised to an extreme degree. I choose children's films as an example since they appeal to what are, more than anyone else, the truest subjects of the postmodern culture, the most unadulterated constructs of the post-industrial, technologised society. *Explorers* (directed by Joe Dante, 1985) provides a perfect example since it acknowledges the glut of cultural production Baudrillard describes, yet contradicts his notion that all meaning has imploded and all difference has faded away. The film concerns the adventures of three early adolescent boys who, after receiving instructions through dreams planted in their psyches by aliens, decide to build a spacecraft and fly into space to meet them. The aliens they meet are the perfect postmodernist subjects *à la* Baudrillard – pure 'viewing screens', mere intersections of radio and television waves that are incapable of recognising any difference whatsoever. The main room in the spacecraft is covered with mammoth screens receiv-

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, op cit, p 142.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p 146.

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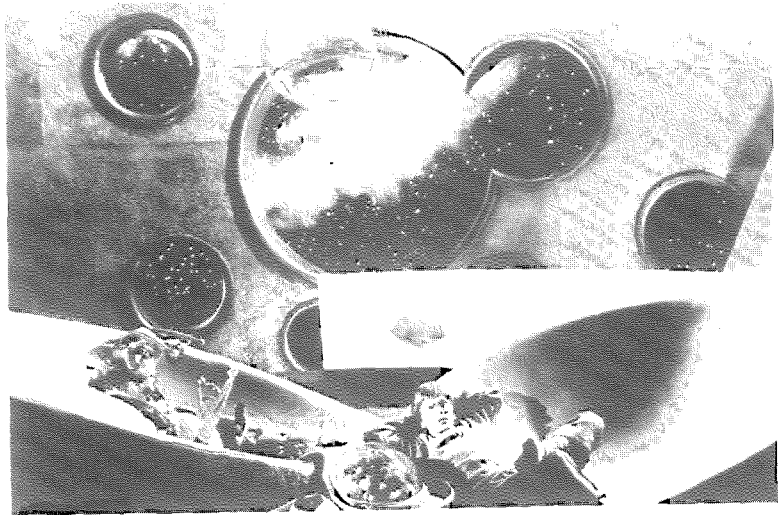
<sup>5</sup> Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Paris, Seuil, 1969.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, op cit, p 139.

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Spaced out:  
extraterrestrial  
televiwing in *Explorers*.



ing transmissions of programmes throughout television history, rather like a 36-channel cable television box spread out on the walls simultaneously. The aliens' speech remains entirely 'mediated', in that the majority of their utterances are simply lines drawn directly from game shows, cartoons, rock songs and old Hollywood films. Yet the visitors from earth insist that the aliens have misinterpreted American culture, since they have merely reproduced the glut of information without understanding the codes which differentiate them as obviously separate discourses. The aliens' speech is hysterically funny, but the humour comes from their obvious failure to understand the messages they are receiving. (As the 'male' alien admits himself - 'I watched four episodes of *Lassie* before I figured out why the little hairy kid never spoke. I mean, he rolled over, sure, he did that fine, but I didn't think he deserved a series for that.'))

When the explorers from earth meet the aliens, their confrontation is ludicrous in large part because they are such thoroughly different types of subjects. The three explorers from earth represent a very different kind of postmodernist subject, one that has been bombarded by these same signals, but, due to that very bombardment, has seized on one particular discourse and believes it to be a privileged mode of representing experience, either as it is, or as it should be. The central figure, Ben, is obsessed with science fiction and believes that it is the only discourse that can explain his world for him. He keeps a secret library of science fiction novels despite parental objections, watches videotapes of science fiction classics, quotes from *Star Trek*, etc. The privileged discourse becomes a kind of *bricolage* of their own devising, especially when the boys build and name their spaceship. They construct their ship out of the refuse of the modern technologised world and its naming reflects the combination of different sources that defines *Explorers* itself as a discourse. The boy scientist suggests 'The Einstein', the intellectual-dreamer wants 'The Jules Verne',



Boyhood *bricolage*: the scientist, the dreamer and the thug combine forces in *Explorers*.

and the thug opts for 'The Thunder Road' since he loves Bruce Springsteen. As a representative of the new science fiction film, *Explorers* may be described exactly in this way – a combination of semi-hard science, late nineteenth-century fantastic adventure, and contemporary rock culture. The *bricolage* may be made up of disparate components, but they form a recognisably differentiated discourse that has a certain power for the explorers as well as the spectators who view the film, one which still interpellates specific subjects for specific ends. As Ben himself says, 'Somebody's been calling us since the beginning. It's like we're supposed to go.' They are indeed being called, and just as the aliens implant dream images within their minds, the film implants the same dream images within the minds of its spectators (a link repeatedly emphasised by the use of point-of-view shots throughout the dream sequences).

A film like *Explorers*, then, represents some of the most significant features of postmodernist cultural production that need to be accounted for by ideological analysis. Signs are not exhausted, nor subjects etherised by overexposure to them. The presentation of characters as *bricoleurs* thematises quite neatly the existence of distinctive signs and the activity of individuals on and through those signs to construct an identity. What we call 'mass culture' is defined by its heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, and the subject defined by activity rather than passivity.<sup>7</sup> Neither the ideological categories developed by Comolli and Narboni<sup>8</sup>, nor the spectator in Plato's cave scenario advanced by Baudry<sup>9</sup> accounts for this kind of film (which constructs such sharp differentiations among different forms of mass culture) or this kind of spectator (who seems quite cognisant of just what objects are passed in front of the fire and will 'surrender his consciousness' only to a particular set of images). One could argue of course that such differences are merely 'spurious product differentiation', but such a charge is ideologically dubious, if not untenable, because what

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<sup>7</sup> The theoretical implications of 'passivity' associated with mass culture study have been developed more thoroughly in Patrice Petro, 'Mass Culture and the Feminine: the Place of Television in Film Studies', *Cinema Journal* Spring 1986, vol 25 no 3, pp 5-21; and Tania Modleski, 'Femininity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture', in Colin McCabe (ed), *High Theory/Low Culture*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1986, pp 37-52.

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, 'Cinema/ Ideology/Criticism', *Screen* Spring 1971, vol 12 no 1, pp 27-36.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Film Quarterly* 1974-75, vol 28 no 2, pp 39-47.

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<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146, July-August 1984, p 57.

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<sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism, Post Modernism', *Against the Grain*, London, Verso, 1986, pp 131-148.

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<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, op cit, p 57.

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<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, op cit, p 141.

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<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, op cit, p 65, emphasis mine.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

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constitutes an authentic (as opposed to spurious) difference cannot be definitively determined for all audiences without engaging in the worst sort of cultural elitism and paternalism.

Yet this is precisely what Fredric Jameson<sup>10</sup> and Terry Eagleton<sup>11</sup> do in their rejection of postmodernism and popular culture as a whole on the grounds that both are tainted by their 'commodification' and are therefore 'inauthentic'. The only authentic alternative to what Jameson has called 'sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a co-existence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable'<sup>12</sup> is high modernism, specifically the avant-garde in its various forms. Eagleton likewise praises modernism for at least resisting commodification, whereas 'Post Modernist culture will dissolve its own boundaries and become co-extensive with ordinary commodified life itself'<sup>13</sup>. But precisely at this point modernism becomes not neo-Marxism, but neo-romanticism.

The cornerstone of this elaborate defence of what Jameson calls the 'high modernists' is a fascination with the then still operative category of 'personal expression', which is now seemingly lost forever. The post-modern world, Jameson insists, means the end of 'style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke which results in the collapse of the high modernist ideology of style - what is as unique and unmistakable as your own *fingerprints*, as *incomparable* as your *own body*'<sup>14</sup>. The very choice of terms here suggests that what Jameson considers high modernism is really high romanticism as it has been transformed and carried into the twentieth century. The obsession with the absolute uniqueness of self and style, carried to the point where a quasi-private language (as individual as a fingerprint) becomes the ideal mode of expression, is a common thread that ties Chateaubriand's *René* to Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. The twentieth-century artist for Jameson must occupy the position of perpetually alienated, enlightened outsider.

The chief crime of postmodernism, then, would appear to be its robbing the modernist romantic of the neat binary oppositions which made their status so easily definable. Jameson claims that contemporary society 'reflects not only the absence of any great collective project, but also the unavailability of the older national language itself'<sup>15</sup>. But there are two enormous problems with this assertion. First, is Jameson really bemoaning the loss of a common national language for its own sake, or rather as a monolith which allows individual oppositional values to stand out clearly against it? When Jameson moves his argument into the realm of contemporary architecture, his preference for modernists such as Mies van der Rohe becomes explicit, but Mies' architecture and that of the International Style as a whole was conceived as a radical break with the impoverished 'national' architecture that served as the status quo. International Style building was never intended to blend into vernacular architecture, but rather to serve as an affront to it, a disjunctive break with its surroundings.

The second, and more fundamental, problem here concerning the

mythic national language is that it was never (as Bakhtin has argued so convincingly) the univocal, homogeneous entity that linguists and theoreticians have assumed it to be.<sup>16</sup> If anything, the centripetal and centrifugal forces Bakhtin describes, the intersection of various specialised discourses and dialects, could clearly be described as a kind of radical eclecticism, the 'sheer heterogeneity' that so repulses Jameson. No simple binary oppositions can exist within the heteroglossic nature of culture, nor can there be any unitary aesthetic criteria, or any one agency that can decide on the effectivity of all cultural production in a comprehensive way.

But the most significant and unacceptable ramification of such a decentred and heteroglossic media would be that within such a context any number of different types of popular discourses could cease to be mere backdrops for individual modernists/romantics and actually assume a critical function within that context, normally reserved for avant-garde or radical cultural analysis. Jameson's rejection of popular culture as a vehicle for such a function is most obvious in 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture'.<sup>17</sup> On one level the essay might appear a rather lukewarm apology for popular culture, but the utopian value of mass media is there only because 'they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated'. For Jameson, the only authentic popular texts are so marginalised as to be yet uncommodified – black, gay and third world literatures, British working class rock, etc. The foundation for this, of course, is the nostalgia for the Paradise Lost of 'folk' culture. Jameson states in unequivocal terms, 'The commodity production of contemporary or industrial mass culture has nothing whatsoever to do, and nothing in common, with older forms of popular or folk art'.<sup>18</sup> Only the modernist text remains somehow admirable in all this since it employs various strategies to resist commodification, usually by resisting the use of codes comprehensible to their audience (suggesting an extremely private rather than folk aesthetic – the 'fingerprint' instead of the 'carnival').

But the contention that commodification suddenly tainted all cultural production starting somewhere in the nineteenth century is fraught with historical problems. The argument that art has become commodified has been made by innumerable critics from a wide variety of critical perspectives and has been located, interestingly enough, at different time periods – the replacement of the fresco by easel-painting as the dominant mode of European painting, the industrial revolution, the arrival of supposedly 'late' capitalism somewhere after World War II, etc. The variation in the dates chosen for the Age of Commodification does not suggest that such transitions have not occurred, but instead undermines their alleged impact, since so much of the cultural production that has been valorised by one theorist as pre-commodified has been vilified as post-commodified by another. Such discrepancies suggest that the impact of commodification is hardly as far-reaching or one-dimensional as many would have it since its impact and temporal dimensions appear to depend more on the scenario of the historian than any kind of *episteme*-shattering moment in

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<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1982, pp 259-422.

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<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text*, Winter 1979.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p 134.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Hirst, *On Law and Ideology*, New York, Macmillan Press, 1981, p 72.

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<sup>20</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, London, Verso/New Left Books, 1984, p 114.

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the evolution of material production.

In addition to the historical limitations of the periodicisation, a serious theoretical problem undermines the obsession with commodification as the underlying evil of all cultural production beginning some time after the sack of Rome. The emphasis placed on commodification presupposes the uniformity of intentions and functions, as well as its subservience to one set of interests, specifically those of the ruling class. But as Paul Hirst has so persuasively argued, the interests of that class are hardly as unified as they might appear, and even more importantly, there is no necessary link between those interests and cultural production as a whole: 'There is no necessary relation between the conditions of existence of the means of representation and what is produced by the action of those means, no necessity that they "represent those conditions"'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Althusser's dictum that the role of ideology is to reproduce the means of production is accurate, but only if applied at the level of the individual commodity, i.e. the goal of the detective novel is to construct specific detective subjects, thereby reproducing the demand for the production of detective fiction as a privileged mode of organising experience.

That individual commodities altruistically work in harmony for the greater good of the system as a whole would necessitate an enormous degree of orchestration of those commodities and a strict uniformity of purpose. As commodities, they may indeed have one common goal – to be consumed – but in the attainment of that goal they may take different forms that problematise the construction of a uniform subjectivity and fail to exhibit any kind of integration or coordination of design. In other words, commodification may indeed be not only a fact of life as well as a fact of art in the twentieth century, but its lack of orchestration, specifically within a postmodernist context, has so thoroughly negated its homogenising force that it can produce only decentred subjects. We may indeed be constantly encouraged to define ourselves through commodities, but the absence of coordination in such a process results in our being asked to define ourselves in quite different ways, thereby producing anything but a uniform subjectivity.

The denial of postmodernism is symptomatic of a much broader problem concerning the relevance and the efficacy of Marxist analysis in the present conjuncture. Eagleton points to Raymond Williams as a kind of model of what the contemporary critic should be, and in doing so compares him to Wordsworth, leading to an explicit comparison of the socialist critic and the romantic poet:

*Socialist criticism cannot conjure a counter-public sphere into existence; on the contrary, that criticism cannot itself fully exist until such a sphere has been fashioned. Until that time the socialist critic will remain stranded between sage and man of letters, combining the critical dissociation of the former with the practical, engaged, wide-ranging activity of the latter.*<sup>20</sup>

Williams has indeed managed to maintain a balance between the two

roles, but in their self-conscious dissociation Jameson and Eagleton appear to be adopting the role of the romantic sage far too wholeheartedly. Eagleton's own epitaph for this figure describes, ironically, his own position *vis à vis* postmodernist cultures:

*No critique which does not establish such an implacable distance between itself and the social order, which does not launch its utterances from some other different place, is likely to escape incorporation; but that powerfully enabling distance is also Romanticism's tragedy, as the imagination joyfully transcends the actual only to consume itself and the world in its own guilt-stricken self-isolation.*<sup>21</sup>

Eagleton here performs (unwittingly) a brilliant self-diagnosis. The search for one great counterpublic sphere is doomed to be fruitless due to the cultural fragmentation produced by the heterogeneity of encoding and decoding strategies at work within a given society, but even if the creation of such a sphere were a possibility, would the outright dismissal of all that is tainted by commodification, especially popular and postmodernist texts, be an appropriate way to begin constructing such a sphere considering the determination of those texts to use the most accessible codes for non-elite audiences? Could such a sphere ever exist between anything but latter-day dissociated sages?

What then is postmodernism's alternative to this high romantic/high modernist dismissal of all commodified art (especially popular culture) and to the insistence that a decentred culture can only be sheer heterogeneity without purpose? According to many of its critics, it could not possibly have an alternative because it has no coherent critical foundation. Jameson points to the 'complacent eclecticism of Post-Modern architecture which randomly and *without principle* but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in over-stimulating ensembles'<sup>22</sup>. To anyone familiar with various manifestos written by postmodernist architects<sup>23</sup> themselves over the past two decades, the assertion that the movement's juxtapositions are without principle will, of course, seem absolutely preposterous. Since the early '60s countless articles, conferences, and book-length treatises have appeared which have tried to establish not only a theoretical common ground among postmodernists, but a pragmatic agenda concerning its place within the larger context of urban planning, an issue which seldom seems to have troubled the high modernists Jameson admires.

A brief discussion of Charles Jencks's work becomes essential here because his position concerning the shift from modernism to postmodernism represents a significant alternative to the Baudrillard-Eagleton-Jameson approach. His analysis of this shift and his attempts to define the differences between the two movements semiotically are also extremely relevant to media studies since he describes not just architectural stylistics, but larger issues concerning the context that produced that shift. Jencks begins his study<sup>24</sup> with a chapter entitled 'The Death of Modern

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p 41.

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<sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism . . .', *op cit*, p 65, emphasis mine.

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco*, Boston, Little Brown Press, 1974; Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1982; and Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1984.

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Jencks, *op cit*.

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Architecture', focusing on the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, purposely blown up by the city administration that had it constructed twenty years before. The Pruitt-Igoe plan had won architectural awards when completed, and was the very quintessence of the International Style, itself the very quintessence of high modernist architecture. The building was demolished after an unending pattern of vandalism far more intensive than in any other housing project. The demolition of Pruitt-Igoe and the collapse of modernist architecture as a whole was inevitable according to Jencks, since from the inception it was a movement that demonstrated indifference, if not outright contempt for place and function in its designs. Its emphasis on purely formal concerns led to a fetishising of the means of production, and as a result to the development, under Mies van der Rohe, of a 'universal grammar of steel I-beams' that was seemingly appropriate for any function (whether office building, housing complex, schools, churches, etc) and any culture (war-ravaged Europe, thriving business centres in the US, etc).

The relevance of these statements to ideological analysis since the late '60s is nothing short of uncanny, since 'radical signifying practice' has served in many significant ways as the literary and filmic equivalent of the International Style, with all the accompanying limitations. In both one finds the valorisation of the means of production as an end in itself, as well as an apparent disregard for their function within a special cultural context. This led to the creation of a pseudo-pantheon, however unintentional, by the *Tel Quel/Screen/Cinétique/Cahiers du Cinéma* combine, of those writers and film-makers whose work epitomised 'radical signifying practice' through the ages, thereby producing a culturally transcendent radical avant-garde that somehow managed to link Rabelais, de Sade, Lautréamont, Godard and Straub as proponents of the same style, linked by the same 'grammar', i.e., the endless play of signifiers. In both its architectural and literary/filmic versions, the International Style tended to be utopian and acontextual, a kind of second-order Esperanto that would signify 'radical other' or 'oppositional voice' regardless of situation. Jencks sums up the problem quite succinctly by insisting that modernists had a rigorous theorised *univalent* style, but no coherent theory of city planning.<sup>25</sup> In much the same way, 'Tel Quelisme' advocated, quite brilliantly, a radical mode of signification, but had only the most utopian, ill-defined notions of how this would have any far-reaching impact on the cultures which surrounded it.

The central contradiction within the International Style in its various media was a simultaneous fascination with the personal expression of a few modernist/romantics and the 'universal grammar' that supposedly unified the movement. But the tension between the individual style (as unique as a set of fingerprints) and the universal aesthetic remains unresolvable semiotically. The former presupposes a virtually private language and the latter presupposes a 'natural' one, having the same meanings and resonances regardless of cultural context. Either assertion by itself is based on rather questionable, decidedly non-semiotic foundations, but

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p 15.

the successful combination of the two is simply an impossibility since the presence of intensely personal style becomes possible only at the expense of the universal. Instead of the harmonious merger of the two, what occurred was the promotion of an elitism masquerading as utopian signifying practice regardless of context or reception.

The emphasis placed on cultural context by so many postmodernist artists is due, according to Jencks, to the fact that postmodernism, which has 'developed from semiotic research, looks at the abstract notion of taste and its coding and then takes up a situational position, i.e. no code is inherently better than any other, and therefore the subculture being designed for must be identified before one code can be chosen rather than another'<sup>26</sup>. Coding as a concept has traditionally been either ignored in relation to high modernists (the notion that 'personal genius' transcends commonplace communication), or defined negatively (codes exist only to be broken by 'personal genius'). The semiotic basis of postmodernism (no matter how consciously or unconsciously theorised), by its emphasis on the vernacular, the ad hoc, and the conventional, would reject any mode of communication predicated on the 'personal', the 'universal', since neither can exist within a semiotic framework. Jencks makes the crucial point that while modernism depended on the elite coding of professional architecture, postmodernism's primary distinguishing characteristic is that it is 'double-coded'<sup>27</sup>, respecting both the professional and popular codes simultaneously, thereby speaking a 'language' that can be understood by two quite different groups through its uses of signifiers accessible to both professional and layman.

This desire to speak in the language of a particular culture has brought about a return to the 'vernacular' and a renewed interest in the historical traditions that constitute it. Jameson attacks this tendency rather vociferously, dismissing it as mere 'cannibalization', or rejecting it entirely as a reactionary 'nostalgia mode'<sup>28</sup>. In this regard Jameson is especially critical of films such as *Body Double* and *Chinatown* because they are merely nostalgic and make no attempt to encounter a 'real history'. This line of argument is especially puzzling since the historical consciousness of the modernists he praises was virtually non-existent. Paolo Portoghesi has compared the outright rejection of historical tradition (especially indigenous ones) by the modernist movement to the myth of Lot's wife – that by turning around to see from whence they came they could only turn into a pillar of salt (as opposed to a pillar of I-beams). The universal grammar of the International Style (in architecture as well as in film and literature) was founded on a temporality that denied the past and sealed off any further development in the future (a closure that its admirers have tried to insure) resulting in a perpetually transcendent 'modern' nether world. Portoghesi summarises this situation most effectively when he discusses the obsession with 'purity' that led the modernists to opt for a pure Euclidean geometry as the basis for their designs:

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, pp 87-88.

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Jencks, *Architecture and Urbanism*, extra edition, January 1986.

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<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism...', *op cit*, p 66.

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<sup>29</sup> Paolo Portoghesi, op cit, p 5.

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<sup>30</sup> Kaja Silverman, 'Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse', in Tania Modleski (ed), *Studies in Entertainment*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1986, pp 150-151.

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*This radical choice interrupted a continuous process based on the recycling and creative transformation of any number of prototypes which had survived in the Western world for centuries. . . . In reality the destruction of morphological continuity was a revolution of methods and ideas. The result, as we shall see, was the creation of a culture incapable of evolution and renewal . . . an iron cage, a labyrinth without exit, in which a search for the new, for the different has produced a tragic uniformity, a trail of ashes.*<sup>29</sup>

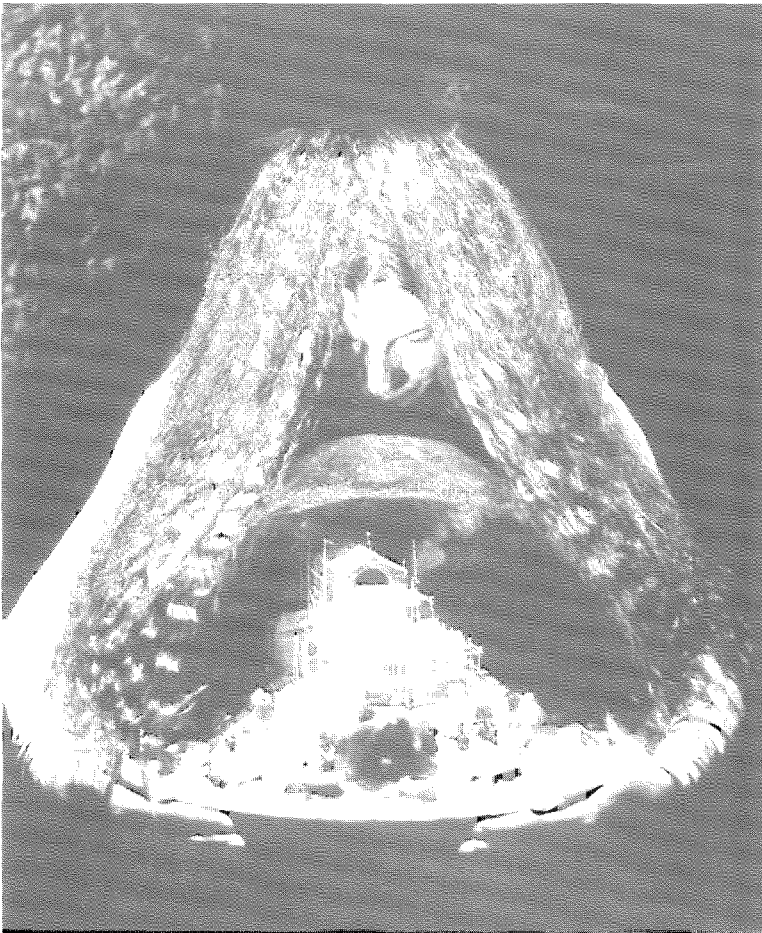
Rather than a mere expression of nostalgia, postmodernism may be seen as an attempt to recover the morphological continuity of specific culture. The use of past styles in this case is motivated not by a simple escapism, but by a desire to understand our culture and ourselves as products of previous codings. In her article on the aesthetics of fashion, Kaja Silverman defends 'retro' dressing (the wearing of vintage clothing) because

*it inserts the wearer in a complex network of cultural and historical references . . . by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, it makes clear that the past is available to us only in a textual form and through the mediation of the present. . . . It is thus a highly visible way of acknowledging that its wearer's identity has been shaped by decades of representational activity, and that no cultural project can ever 'start from zero.'*<sup>30</sup>

Modernist and postmodernist texts differ fundamentally, then, in their respective attitudes toward the 'already said'. The former constructs a dialogic relationship with previous representations only to reject them as outmoded, resulting in an asemiotic zero-sum game. The latter constructs an entirely different relationship with the accumulated representational activity, recognising that this activity cannot be conjured away by a sudden rupture because it forms the very fabric of our 'structures of feeling'. Postmodernist texts acknowledge that 'meaning', 'identity', etc, are complicated not only by the decentred nature of current cultural production, but also by the co-presence of previous representations persisting through mass media, specifically television, which presents its own morphological continuity on a daily basis. In concentrating on synchronic tensions rather than diachronic breaks, the postmodernist text constructs *polylogic* rather than dialogic relationships with the 'already said', where the relationship between past and present coding is based on interaction and transformation instead of simple rejection.

This polylogic relationship with the 'already said' is not preservationist, but explicitly archaeological in its attempt to discover relationships among the layers of accumulated representations. Films as different as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Road Warrior* (1982), *Parsifal* (1984), *Explorers* (1985) and *Blue Velvet* (1986) all labour to reconstruct such a continuity for varying purposes. *Parsifal* is perhaps the most clear-cut example of this 'postmodernist archaeology' at work. While the film ostensibly presents a performance of the Wagner opera, Syberberg makes his produc-

tion a kind of filmic site where the layers of German cultural traditions (political, sexual, artistic, etc.) are gradually uncovered. The opera becomes not just Wagner's masterpiece, but the lynch-pin of a cultural continuum emphasising at the same time those traditions which lead back to the medieval period as well as those which lead forward into the '80s. Syberberg emphasises the previous various visualisations of the opera through the use of back-projection, inserted photographs and drawings that repeatedly, within one image, present the current film juxtaposed with the Bayreuth productions of 1882 and 1951, as well as *Siegfried* (directed by Fritz Lang, 1924) and a puppet show modelled on the actors that created the roles. Syberberg then presents not only multiple productions, but multiple modes of representation – photos, puppet shows, highly stylised sets, minimalist sets, symbolic considerations, illuminated manuscripts, the score itself, etc. The shot encapsulating the activity of the film most effectively is the long tracking movement that leads into the



Representing  
representation: Kundry  
holds a model of  
Bayreuth in *Parsifal*.

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<sup>31</sup> Hal Foster,  
*Recodings: Art,  
Spectacle, Cultural  
Politics*, Port  
Townsend, Bay  
Press, 1985, p 125.

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hall of the Grail Castle. When the camera moves past a series of flags and banners from German history, from the medieval to the nineteenth century up to the swastika, the continuum becomes clear. *Parsifal* the opera is a product of the nineteenth century recreating a medieval myth which itself was appropriated as a myth for fascism in the twentieth century. These juxtapositions reiterate the film's central point: *Parsifal* can no longer simply be one classic or radically new production, but rather the assemblage of all its incarnations and appropriations; it is both the fulfilment of the Grail brotherhood and the foreshadowing of the Nazi brotherhood, it can never start from zero again.

That such attempts to investigate the morphological continuity of a specific culture are dismissed as 'neo-conservatism' by modernist critics crystallises the semiotic and ideological differences of the two movements. Hal Foster criticises postmodernist architects who insist on making their designs speak in 'public' language, believing that such work is necessarily reactionary, a 'program that seeks to recoup the ruptures of modernism and restore the continuity with historical forms'<sup>31</sup>. The very choice of words here is especially telling; 'ruptures' are clearly the valorised activity and the historical/cultural continuity remains only the uninteresting background against which modernist gestures are to be appreciated, rather than the assemblage of practices and traditions that give a specific culture its historical/ ethnic distinctiveness. The cult of the individual genius, whether called romanticism or modernism, remains firmly in place. But which is the 'neo-conservative' stance, the fascination with the 'ruptures' produced by enlightened artists, or the attempt to produce an architectural language understandable to its inhabitants?

The emergence of postmodernist textual practice, and more importantly the postmodernist cultural context, makes ideological analysis more crucial than ever before in the decoding and evaluating of those competing messages. The issue of subject construction should indeed remain the central problematic in ideological analysis, but here again we can hope to understand the complexity of the processes involved in current context only if we go beyond simple denunciation of everything tainted by commodification. Jameson contends that the individual self has been annihilated by postmodernism since it is no longer a centred subject, yet this presupposes that subjectivity is impossible without a rigorous homogeneity of all ideological messages within a given context. But in the face of competitive interpellation the subject is seldom answering one uniform 'call', but rather being hailed by multiple, competing messages all issued simultaneously. The 'disappearing self' criticism has become commonplace, but it fails to take into account the centring power of individual discourses, or the power of individuals to make choices regarding those discourses. While a unitary culture may have disappeared, unitary discourses constructing very specific subjects have only intensified. The category of the subject remains highly viable in large part because it has never been so hotly contested.

The function of criticism *vis à vis* subject construction must be thoroughly reconceived if it is to have any significant impact in contemporary society. In discussing the influence of new technologies on postmodernist practice, Jencks states, 'We can reproduce fragmented experiences of different cultures and, since all the media have been doing this for fifteen years, our sensibility has been modified. Thanks to color magazines, travel, and Kodak, Everyman has a well-stocked *musée imaginaire* and is a potential eclectic.'<sup>32</sup>

This point contains several ramifications for subject construction. The image of the *musée imaginaire* is especially useful since it suggests not only the stock-piling, but purposeful arrangement of the signs which bombard us constantly. Here the activity of the subject is as important as activity on the subject, whereas previous conceptions of the subject have emphasised only the latter. Due to the bombardment of conflicting messages the individual subject *must* be engaged in processes of selection and arrangement. Not that subjects are completely free to choose as independent agents, unconstructed by the very messages they come into contact with, or that a range of choices doesn't change drastically from society to society. Nevertheless, to deny that a selection process hasn't been made mandatory by that bombardment is to posit an absurdly simplified subject, either strapped down with eyes pried open like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, force-fed a carefully orchestrated series of images, or so media-surfeited that he can no longer recognise differences among signs. But the lack of orchestration of cultural production is precisely what makes such an imagined spectator ludicrously outmoded. The situation, then, is not a 'democratic' plurality where aesthetic and ideological alternatives are carefully arranged in a kind of *laissez-faire* smorgasbord. Instead, a semiotic glut necessitates the arrangement, even hierarchising, of conflicting discourses by individual discourses and individual subjects at a localised, 'sub-cultural' level. The bombardment of signs has produced, by no preconceived design whatsoever, a subject that is engaged in the process of being interpellated while simultaneously arranging those messages, the curator of a private *musée imaginaire*.

A theory of subject emphasising the activities undertaken by that subject when faced with conflicting cultural messages remains one of the most pressing needs in contemporary criticism. The most promising approaches to this issue already have been inaugurated by Morley<sup>33</sup>, Bennett<sup>34</sup>, Radway<sup>35</sup> and others working within the 'British culturalist' tradition. This work, unlike a great deal of more traditional Marxist analysis, stresses that control over the means of production does not insure absolute manipulation of the mode of consumption. Bennett's notion of reading formations is particularly interesting in this regard, owing to its emphasis on the complex network of relationships that shape all text-receiver interactions. The only limitation of this work is a tendency to undervalue or ignore tensions among discourses at the moment of production. Locating the decentring process only at the point of reception and presupposing rela-

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, op cit, p 95.

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<sup>33</sup> David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London, British Film Institute, 1980.

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<sup>34</sup> Tony Bennett, 'Texts, Readers, Reading Formations', *MMLA* 16, 1983.

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<sup>35</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

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tive homogeneity of the messages to be decoded creates a somewhat lopsided understanding of cultural activity in a postmodern context. We still need a greater understanding of the selection process individual subjects go through when faced with this glut of signs, and more specifically, a subtle conception of the *bricolage* they often perform.

By reconsidering postmodernism, then, not as a menace to society, but as a thorough-going attempt to understand the semiotic basis of cultural activity we can escape the iron cage not only of modernism, but of the ideological analysis founded on the same presuppositions regarding cultural production. Jameson's, Eagleton's and Foster's critiques of postmodernism, like Adorno's attack on the 'culture industry' that so clearly informs them, are themselves written in a 'nostalgia mode', essentially a nostalgia for a culture where the oppositional version of 'the best that has been thought and said' is easily located. Ironically, the nostalgia appears to be for a Panopticon Lost, where societies were supposedly centralised and homogeneous, but oppositional voices would know their own and could endlessly plot utopian prison breaks in officially Oppositional Cells. The postmodernist redefinition of mass culture does not necessitate an open acceptance of all popular texts or the end of 'decidability of effect'. Aesthetic/ideological judgment is not ignored, but redefined and relocated at the junctures between opposing discourses within specific cultures, where critical, ethical and ideological decisions must be made, rather than according to an a-contextual, a-vernacular set of transcendent principles that might constitute a universal grammar of Oppositional Genius.

## ADVANCE NOTICE

# IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN

British Film Institute Summer School

25th–31st July, 1987

How children watch television needs to be thought about anew as broadcasting technologies and policies shape up for the nineties. Preparation for the changing circumstances in our viewing habits and in television's international distribution and circulation needs to be made so that parents and children, teachers and researchers can make informed interventions.

Television producers and marketing companies define children as an audience; psychologists and teachers study child development; audience research investigates the 'effects' television might have on children while they persist with their preferences. Children's protection and education have a high profile on the agenda of all the political parties.

The 1987 BFI Summer School, *In Front of the Children*, will investigate

- how television's futures look from the vantage point of the 1980s
- how children have formed the objects of different audience research projects
- how advertisers and TV companies produce and market their products for children
- how variously children understand and read television programmes
- how parents, teachers and broadcasters can use their combined knowledge of children and of television in the future.

*In Front of the Children* will take place at the University of Stirling. Commissioned papers will be presented and there will be film and video screenings and consultation with panels of experts. Discussions will be held in seminar groups and there will be time for reading.

For further information and details contact Tana Wollen or Kate Steele,  
BFI Education, 81 Dean Street, London W1V 6AA, telephone 01-437 4355.



# THE IN-DIFFERENCE OF TELEVISION

LAWRENCE GROSSBERG MAPS TV'S  
AFFECTIVE ECONOMY

## I. Speed Limits

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK for interpreting television – its specific textual practices and forms, its active insertion into real historical formations, and its appropriation by audience formations – has to recognise, not only that television includes a wide range of discourses and textual practices, but that it reshapes and reinfects them by incorporating them into its own practices and contexts.

I want to look at one line of contemporary cultural discourse, sometimes referred to as 'postmodern', which is increasingly active in different genres on the US television screen. Its most popular televisual sites at the moment include *Miami Vice*, *Moonlighting*, *The Max Headroom Show*, *Pee Wee Herman's Playhouse*, and perhaps *L. A. Law*. But it is not limited to 'fictional' series; it increasingly enters television's relationship to certain 'real events'. Recent examples might include a sportscaster's excursion to a *real* Boston sports bar that turned out to be the set, in Los Angeles, of *Cheers*; or Geraldo Rivera's documentary on drugs – *American Vice* – which was built around live coverage of *real* drug busts which had obviously been timed and orchestrated for their visual power on the programme; or the recent network coverage of the Congressional hearings on the Iranian arms sales and the Contra connection – hours of the witnesses' pre-announced refusal to testify. Such 'postmodern' texts have not emerged *ex nihilo*; they operate in other media and have their own historical precedents. But their incorporation into popular television does suggest that they have moved on the contradictory terrain of common sense,

what Gramsci described as 'traces without an inventory'<sup>1</sup>. If such practices are increasingly taken for granted, the question is precisely what is being taken for granted and how it is being effectively articulated. If these 'postmodern' texts are increasingly visible in a wide range of media and forms, the issue is precisely how television articulates these structures. How we can make sense of such texts as televisual practices within a broader historical configuration of the popular?

Television theory needs to operate at the intersection of three models of cultural interpretation, or more accurately, in the spaces won and lost by each of them as they have responded to Althusser's theory of ideology and the social formation. *Film theory's* poststructuralist and psychoanalytic focus on subject positionings foregrounds the specificity of the medium and its apparatuses. Yet it fails to radicalise this commitment because it privileges particular apparatuses as a result of its assuming an engaged subjectivity concentrating on and absorbed into the film-world. *Cultural studies* uses Gramsci's theory of articulation to foreground notions of struggle and contradiction in the economies of power and to undermine assumptions of historical necessity and critical elitism; yet it continues to confine questions of cultural power to ideological struggles over the double articulation of signification and representation. Its notion of culture remains flat and passionless, and its theory of articulation remains abstract and unmotivated. Finally, *postmodernism* attacks any manifestation of structure (or difference) in the name of the multiplicity and dispersion. Its radical contextualism emphasises historical specificity, pointing to the emergence of new historical events, structures and experiences. Yet by absolutising the historical breaks, it fails to describe the specific configurations – the partially continuous contexts – within which these emergent practices are effective.

It is within this theoretical space that I propose to examine how television appropriates certain 'postmodern' practices and what their popularity says about the current struggles and relations of power on the cultural terrain. Consider *Miami Vice*, in some ways the most interesting current programme, if only because it has so easily divided the audience into fans and enemies. *Miami Vice* is, as its critics have said, all on the surface. And the surface is nothing but a collection of quotations from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia. It is, in some ways, the perfect televisual image, minimalist (the sparse scenes, the constant long shots, etc) yet concrete (consider how often we are reminded of the apparent reality of its scene). The narrative is less important than the images. In *Miami Vice*, the cops put on a fashion show (not only of clothes and urban spaces, but of their own 'cool' attitudes) to a Top-40 soundtrack. (Importantly, however, it also incorporates many songs that are less likely to be recognised by the general audience.) The protagonists spend their lives, not so much patrolling Miami as cruising it, only to rediscover the narrative as an afterthought in the last few minutes. Narrative closure becomes a mere convenience of the medium. And the spectator as subject all but disappears in the rapid editing and rather uncomfortable camera angles.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (trans by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith), New York, International Publishers, 1971, p 324.

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In a recent programme trailer, *Miami Vice* appropriated the very criticisms that have been made of it ('It's wall to wall style'). But, of course, it has always flaunted its absolute in-difference to its content. When asked what was the basic rule for producing the programme, the producer responded 'No earth tones.' Similarly, his recent suggestion to change the colour scheme (abandoning the pastels) is a more radical threat to the programme than the declining quality of the scripts.

Of course, the gestures of such irony are historically part of the media, both technological and discursive (US examples since the 1950s would include Ernie Kovacs, *Saturday Night Live*, *SCTV* and David Letterman). Yet it is often missed by those who condemn *Vice* for its representation (and celebration?) of a particularly luxurious lifestyle. After all, the lifestyle of the two cops is a pose. In some real sense, the style but not the life is theirs: two actors posing as cops posing as 'players' (or poseurs). Crockett's famed boat and car are the property of the Miami Dade Police



*Miami Vice* a forensic fashion show with a Top-40 soundtrack.

Department, despite the fact that he seems to go into withdrawal when confronted with the thought of losing them. And when he almost loses his car to the budget cuts, it takes an act of God (or in this case, Lieutenant Castillo) to restore his right to possess it. In fact, the show makes a great deal of the problematic line between the two levels of performance. As viewers, we are never really sure which one is talking, cop or player. Moreover, the two lead actors often refer to the line, marking it as both decisive and undecideable, the only site of reality and yet, ultimately ironic. But this explains neither its popularity nor the vehemence of those who attack it. Why is dressing 'like *Vice*' any different from the sense of style embodied within rock/youth subcultures? If the latter encode some moment of resistance, why doesn't the former? Is it merely the fact of its origin – TV, or its success – the size of its audience, or the commercial sources of the clothing, that renders it somehow inherently less capable of marking some struggle?

Such ironic gestures are common across a wide variety of programmes. What once were taken as signs of seriousness – a kind of self-reflexivity about the relationship between image and reality – has become an almost requisite but still clichéd gesture. *Moonlighting* – a sort of *film noir* video version of *Miami Vice* – regularly incorporates such moments into its script but without any sense they need be jarring: e.g., the male lead, Addison, rushes into the police office to 'save' his female boss. Although both are detectives, his image of saving in this context has apparently demanded that he become a lawyer (he performs as a lawyer, within his performance as hard-boiled detective, within his performance as a surprisingly well-educated, witty and sensitive male chauvinist pig, within his performance as an actor). Whether any of these performances are credible seems irrelevant or undecideable; the cop seems unable to decide, his partner is unconvinced. The cop says 'Hey, you can't just break in here like that,' to which Addison responds, matter of factly, 'Tell the writers.' In another episode, Addison is made the star of his own TV detective series. And in the final episode of the season, the crew dismantles the set before any narrative conclusion. The principals simply walk off-stage, still undecided about whether to enter into the sexual relation which has been a subtext all season. But, once again, the audience is uncertain as to whether the choice is posed in their role as detectives or as actors.

I point to these rather common events in order to suggest that their power and impact cannot be found if we treat them as texts to be interpreted. I propose to take them as billboards to be driven past, roadmarkers that do not tell us where we are going but merely advertise or better, announce (because they comprise and mark the boundaries, they are both the inside and the limits of) the town we are passing through. Of course, billboards do more than advertise; they are a space in which many different discourses, both serious and playful, appear. They are also sites of struggle, both institutionalised and tactical. We are not misled by the billboard, telling us that the New York Deli is two miles left at the next turn-off, into thinking that it is announcing that we are in, or even remotely

near, New York. Its direct appeals, its inscribed meanings, its specific message, seem oddly irrelevant and rarely useful (whether because we are driving too quickly or because we see them every day). It doesn't really matter whether it is another billboard for MacDonald's, an anonymous bank, Pepsi or a political organisation. It is not a sign to be interpreted, but rather, a piece of a puzzle to be assembled.

I want to suggest that interpreting the effects of popular culture, and its politics, is less like reading a book than like driving by the billboards that mark the system of interstate highways, county roads and city streets that is the United States. (This is not to offer the street as the only reality, for there are real events taking place off the roads – in houses, factories, jails, etc. Further, if one wants to understand the United States, a balance must be struck between the local detail and the national structures. The United States is neither New York nor Texas nor Main Street. It is, somehow, scattered among all of these.)

We might say that any individual billboard is in-different. It is neither built upon a radical sense of textual difference nor does it erase all difference. The billboard's identity and power somehow depend upon its own indifference to its apparent lack of difference. It is different only because it is indifferent to difference. In-difference describes a particular historical structure of relationship enacted in the contextual play between identity and difference. It is this notion that I wish to explore here. If semiotics teaches us that identity is constituted out of difference, and postmodernism that identity has disappeared with the erasure of difference, I want to argue that the effectivity of TV is precisely the complex effects it generates by operating, in specific ways, on the line of in-difference. Television practices function in part within a larger context which is reshaping (1) the powers and pleasures of identities and differences and (2) the relationship between ideology and affect. Together, these define an affective economy around television. As a response to a particular historical set of events, at least a part of TV's functioning involves re-articulating what we might describe as the social structure and power of difference within an affective democracy. In this article, I want only to lay out the theoretical and critical framework for such analyses, for it is necessary to get some sense of the cultural landscape before one can begin to locate particular events within it.

## II. Post No Bills

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, pp 219-253.

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The most compelling example of a critical theory which responds to the specificity of a popular medium is film theory. But film theory rests on the assumed privileging, not only of a particular apparatus, but also of a particular form of engaged subjectivity. Despite Benjamin's descriptions<sup>2</sup>, film theory (and even most popular critics) act as though the viewer were engaged in a concentrative act in which they are absorbed into the world of the film.

It is irrelevant whether this is empirically accurate (what about all those kids who go to films on dates, sometimes explicitly as an occasion for making out: are they absorbed into the film, or is the film absorbed into their context?) or whether it is itself constitutive of the ways in which we expect people, ourselves included, to behave while watching films.<sup>3</sup> Such theories do little to explain the popularity (and reaction against) diverse media events, whether *E.T.*, *Rambo*, *Back to the Future*, *Out of Africa*, *The Color Purple*, etc, or *Dynasty*, *Hill St. Blues*, *Cagney and Lacey*, *Miami Vice*, *The Bill Cosby Show*, MTV, mega-events, re-runs, game shows, particular ads (which are hyped and watched with the same intensity as programmes), wrestling, etc, not to mention the various clones that have emerged. Moreover, if we try to untangle the audiences for these, we will find a complex series of overlapping sympathies and antagonisms. And we will find little help in pre-existing sociological or political positions (e.g., the left wing critic who, like so many fans, knew he had to hate *Rambo* but loved it 'once the shooting started'; or all those who both recognised how manipulative *E.T.* was and yet still enjoyed it). Recent work, even within film theory, has attempted to move beyond the original position's (e.g., classic *Screen* theory's) inadequate assumption that its reading describes the necessary effects of the text on the audience. That is to say, film theory finds itself facing much the same dilemma as its sometime nemesis, cultural studies: the problem of the gap between productive interests, textual practices, and consumption effects or, in simpler terms, the gap between encoding and decoding. This problematic is now inscribed into the heart of cultural interpretation (in a variety of disguises – e.g., intertextuality).

However, the problems of cultural interpretation are, if anything, magnified to an unprecedented extent by the functioning of the mass media apparatuses. Not only is every media event mediated by other texts, but it is almost impossible to know what constitutes the bounded text which might be interpreted or which is actually consumed. It is absurd to think that anyone watches a single television show, or even a single series, just as it is absurd to think that only by watching it is one brought under its intertextual filigree. But there is even more to the intertextuality of TV, for it defines an 'in-difference of content'. There is, in fact, a significant difference between watching a particular programme (which we all do sometimes) and watching TV (which we all do most of the time). That is to say, the specifics of the episode are often less important than the fact of the TV's being on (at least one form of viewing involves fans as 'couch potatoes' who 'veg out' in front of the tube rather than pay it any sort of concentrated attention), or the fact of the latest installment (repeat or not) of a particular series. (*Hill Street Blues*' effort to have the US audience determine which episodes would be repeated was an interesting recognition of this dilemma.)

Film theory correctly recognised that it was not defining a particular medium but rather, an entire apparatus defined by particular contexts of production and consumption, as well as by the technological appropria-

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<sup>3</sup> Note the change in what counts as acceptable behaviour in cinemas. This may be in response to the normalisation of films on TV, but also to the incorporation of TV practices in cinemas, e.g., advertising and, recently in the US, leaving the houselights on until the feature begins.

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tions of the medium. The very force and impact – the presence, if you will – of any medium changes significantly as it is moved from one context to another (a bar, a theatre, the living room, the bedroom, the beach, a rock concert – all of these are occasions of TV's delegated look and distracted glance). Each medium is then a mobile term, taking shape as it situates itself – almost always comfortably – within the different roadside rests of our lives. That is, the text is located, not only intertextually, but in a range of apparatuses as well, defined technologically but also by other social relations and activities. One rarely just listens to the radio, watches TV or even goes to the movies – one is studying, dating, driving somewhere else, partying, etc. Not only is it the case that the 'same' text is different in different contexts, but its multiple appearances are complexly intereffective.

This implies two further practices of in-difference as constitutive of the media: the in-difference of context, and of form. The first acknowledges not merely that people use or consume media in different ways, but that the media are themselves inseparable from the diversity of contexts within which they are identifiable. The second marks the way that the mobility of the media constantly undermines any attempt to define them apart from and as different from particular cultural forms. What is the medium and what the form of television? What is its relation to film or video or even music? Is radio the medium and rock and roll the form? But then, what is the relationship of rock and roll on records, television, 'live', etc?

The in-difference of the media displaces the problematic of cultural theory from that of coding (encoding, decoding, transcoding) to that of the apparatus itself (articulation). Television makes this displacement particularly obvious and disconcerting, if only because the apparatuses are so complexly interrelated and so rapidly changing (e.g., larger screens, higher quality resolution, VCRs and remote controls, stereo, cable, the incorporation of TV into public places like discos, bars and concert stadiums – where the choice of what to watch becomes self-consciously problematic). There are nevertheless some things that cut across the majority of TV apparatuses. Television viewing is a large temporal part of our lives, with prolonged viewing periods which suggests the formation of viewing habits. Certainly, this has partly determined its ordinariness, its taken-for-grantedness, its integration into the mundanities of everyday life and simultaneously, its constant interruption by and continuity with our other daily routines, activities and social relationships. Viewers rarely make plans to watch TV – although it is on occasion a social event to be shared with friends. Not since the '50s has it been privileged in anything like the ways in which 'going to the movies' is. Moreover, television is rarely intently gazed at, with the viewer absorbed into the work, but rather distractedly glanced at or accommodated within the viewer's own momentary mood or position, or treated merely as a framework of another reality (when only the character-types and narrative facts are important, as in daytime soaps). Its taken-for-grantedness makes it appear trivial, an unimportant moment of our lives, one in which we certainly invest no

great energy. Yet its power to restructure the temporal and spatial aspects of our lives remains unquestionable. And it continues, across a broad spectrum of people and programmes, to fascinate us. TV makes the trivial into the important; again, the structure of in-difference appears. TV is empowered precisely because we are comparatively in-different to it even as it is in-different to us (it doesn't demand our presence yet it is always waiting for us). Such in-difference makes the very idea of a television *fan* seem strange.

We might also point to the fragmentation and interruption of the discourses constantly appearing on and disappearing from the TV screen.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that this is an accurate description, both textually and phenomenologically. This does not mean, however, that segments, of whatever size, do not take on some meanings for the viewers. Television is constructed from intersecting discourses; it is an assemblage of segments which need bear no obvious relation (but can) to their most immediate context. Yet they always do have relations to other displaced segments, and particular segments can regularly or momentarily take on relationships to one another. These connections, however, are neither necessarily part of the phenomenology of viewing, nor dependent upon the ability to read such intertextual interpretations from the screen. This fragmentation is only magnified by the interruptions built into the viewing contexts, and it is obviously increased by the emerging technological capacities to zip and zap within the programmes and around the channels. This fragmentation is also evident in the secondary status TV assigns to narrative continuity, preferring to establish a limited continuity by repetition (of scenes, of issues, of images) and a broader continuity by its unique relation to itself. In that relation, television creates its own history and its own reality (as a CBS ad recently offered, 'come into our world') within which programmes and characters increasingly refer to each other. This is an intertextuality that requires no elite knowledge or even actual viewing history. It is history inscribed upon the screen, history as and within its own images. And yet, it is a history which, increasingly, is the proof of our own existence.

Television criticism has yet to confront the problems posed by the determinations of TV apparatuses; it either ignores the problem entirely or limits itself to an assumed set of apparatuses defined by the conjunction of a primitive video technology (small screen, low quality reproduction, both visually and aurally), a particular domestic context (usually in a semi-public private space like the living room) and a capitalist imperative (to sell bodies and thus, to hold the viewers' attention). The conjunction of these features is taken to explain the peculiar signifying practices of this supposedly dominant apparatus: the importance of sound (it makes sense to listen to TV on a radio; a similar connivance for cinema would be absurd, although the changing source of revenues for a film increasingly requires adjusting the ratio of image to sound); the minimalism of the image; its constant domestic framing and appeal; its ability to become 'a

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<sup>4</sup> There are three different versions of this: see Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974, on flow; John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, whose rereading emphasises the segmentation of the flow; and Hal Foster, 'TV in Two Parts', in Barbara Kruger (ed), *TV Guides*, Kuklapolitan Press, 1985, who polarises TV practices into fragmentation/fetishisation/flow/consumption.

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relay of a reality already there', i.e., its apparent status as a window on the 'live' world. TV becomes our representative; we do not identify with the position of the camera so much as 'delegate'<sup>5</sup> our look to it. It is this lack of voyeurism that explains why everything becomes fictionalised by the cinematic apparatus while everything appears real in the TV apparatuses.

But such descriptions, however insightful, still fail to question the limits and effectiveness of this apparatus, nor do they explain the fluidity with which television has moved into different apparatuses, both less and more private, both higher and lower technologies, both larger and smaller screens, etc. Further, they fail to face the consequences of the limited concentration or interpretative activity invested in television. Critics continue to speak as though all of the values they can read in the text are somehow magically inscribed upon the minds of the viewers. Their hermeneutic framework cannot explain the actual effects of the television or of particular viewing habits, but instead simply blames television (through conscious or unconscious practices) for what we too often take to be the sorrowful state of political and moral consciousness in the world today.

On the other hand, approaches which attempt to understand the particular decoding or transcoding practices by which particular audiences appropriate texts into the contexts of their own discursive competences fall prey to the ever diminishing return on sociological differences. In fact, they end up largely ignoring the determining power of the apparatus in favour of the signifying networks of connotation. That is, such theories cannot escape the problematic of meaning and representation. Their sophistication lies in the recognition of the gap between the two terms (requiring either a double articulation or a process of subject-positioning; both of these serve to describe how some meanings become empowered as representations or how some signifying practices are also ideological). Nevertheless, they still fail to take into account the radical implications of the gap between text, meaning and representation (or more broadly, the gaps between production, texts and consumption, or between interests, practices and effects). They fail to recognise that 'people making history but in conditions not of their own making' is as necessary an insight in the field of culture as it is in political economy. People are constantly struggling, however naively and ineffectively, to bring what they are given into their own contexts, to make something out of it which would give them a little more purchase on their lives, a little more control, which would enable them to live their lives a bit more as they see fit (i.e., according to their images and desires – moral, ideological and affective).

### III. Maps for Sale

If not every meaning is a representation, and not every text has representational effects, it may also be true that texts may have effects other than meaning-effects, and meanings themselves may be involved in relations

other than representational. That is, the connection between a particular cultural practice and its actual effects may be a complex multiplicity of lines or articulations. But even this is too simple, for it suggests that articulations are themselves individually simple or straightforward links. Instead we must recognise, on the one hand with Hall<sup>6</sup>, that articulation is always a struggle and, on the other hand, with Deleuze and Guattari<sup>7</sup>, that such lines are themselves fragmented and rarely proceed in what might be represented as a straight line. A text may, in some or all contexts, have meaning effects, but it also may have others (e.g., TV is rearranging the physical space of the house; laws against drugs give shape to the commodity structure of that market; lower speed limits contradict the design practices of highways). And in some contexts, meanings may have representational effects, but they may also have other effects (e.g., on our mood). Effects are always intereffective, on the way from and to other effects. That a particular meaning-effect also has a representational effect may in part be determined by other articulations (e.g., subject-positionings).

This increasingly complex and convoluted description offers the possibility of placing the media in a context of effects that are not necessarily defined or completed by signification (i.e., it is not merely a matter of recognising the difference between representation and fantasy), and that cannot be guaranteed in advance. One might perhaps add that meaning-effects are not a simple category: there are different forms of meaning (e.g., narrative, connotative, evaluative, reflective). The ways in which the meaningfulness of *Miami Vice*, *Hill St. Blues* and *The Bill Cosby Show* are defined by and matter for the fan (i.e., are effective) are quite different. This becomes even clearer if we compare such 'traditional' forms of programming with MTV or wrestling. Yet in any programme or form, we have to leave open the possibilities of different effective meaning-forms (e.g., a large number of people claim not to like wrestling but to watch it because they like Hulk Hogan; what then are they seeing?).

This model presents what I take to be the postmodernism of theory in Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault<sup>8</sup>. One can describe it by four assumptions: (1) anti-essentialism (radical contextualism, overdetermination, no necessary guarantees); (2) a 'monism of pluralities' (heterodoxy – otherness rather than difference, a theory of practices as effectivity); (3) wild realism (a materialism which recognises the multiplicity of planes of effects); (4) articulation (the historical specificity of and struggles over structures of identity and difference). Each of these assumptions has both a theoretical and a political inflection. For example, the last points to the need to move, theoretically, between different levels of abstraction, and politically, between different levels of structures (hierarchies) of power relations.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the first challenges any theoretical hierarchy and demands, politically, that one not seek the high ground of elitism, but always the quicksand of the masses.

Postmodern theory also requires us to reposition ourselves in the con-

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2, 1985, pp 87-114.

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Rhizome', *I & C*, no 8, 1981, pp 49-71.

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<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Questions of Method: an Interview', *I & C*, no 8, 1981, pp 3-14; and Lawrence Grossberg, 'Experience, Signification and Reality: the Boundaries of Cultural Semiotics', *Semiotica* 14, 1982, pp 73-106.

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<sup>9</sup> The question of levels of abstraction significantly redefines the commitment to context, since each local analysis is defined by its appropriate level of abstraction. That is, local or conjunctural analysis is not locatable on an axis of big/small. One of the errors of much of the writing on postmodernism is the failure reflexively to acknowledge the level on which it is operating: e.g., Fredric Jameson's incorporation of multi-national capitalism into his descriptions of the texture of everyday life in 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, July-August, 1984, pp 53-92.

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texts we are describing (for we are always doing more than describing) which is not the same as, but might well include, problematising our relationship to them. Nor is it merely a case of, as Foucault might have said, 'taking sides'. It rather involves moving through the complexity of social positionings and social identities (which while not the same, are closely connected), of recognising that any individual position (including that of the TV fan) is actually mobilely situated in a fluid context. Thus, being a fan does not guarantee how one watches TV or even a particular programme; there is a complex set of practices and identities that are differentially distributed within particular apparatuses. They do not simply vary with the programme, although that is sometimes determining (in particular contexts, one cannot talk during *Hill St. Blues*, while conversation during *Miami Vice* is often allowed if it is related to the programme, and during the Superbowl talk is requisite and not necessarily related to the game. But that all changes when one moves the TV into a different social context). It is not merely that individuality is fragmented but rather than it functions as, and is articulated out of, a nomadic wandering through ever-changing positions and apparatuses (dance fever). The critic has not only to map out the lines of this mobility, but also recognise that only by entering into this nomadic relation to the media can they map the complex social spaces of media effects. We need a vocabulary to describe the shifting and contradictory partial relations of nomadic subjectivity, a subjectivity which is always moving along different vectors and changing its shape, but always having a shape.

Nomadic subjectivity describes a post-humanist theory of the subject. Rejecting the existential subject who has a single unified identity that



*Hill St. Blues*: varying viewing practices with its demand for quiet attention.

somehow exists in the same way in every practice, it proposes a subject that is constantly remade, reshaped as a mobile set of vectors in a fluid context. But also rejecting the poststructural deconstruction of the subject into a fractured, fragmented and *ad hoc* discursive production, it proposes that it does matter who is acting and from where, that the subject is the site of struggle, an ongoing site of articulation with its own history. The nomadic subject is amoeba-like, struggling to win some space for itself in its local context. While its shape is always determined by its nomadic articulations, it always has a shape which is itself effective.

There are, however, at least two other ways in which the term 'post-modernism' is used: as a cultural description, and as an historical description. Without directly engaging the enormous variety of discussions that have taken place on these issues, let me propose alternative terms for these (if only to avoid the temptation to slide from a common signifier – the 'postmodern' – to an assumed or necessary relationship between the domains, as if one could easily move from Jameson's<sup>10</sup> convincing descriptions of cultural practices to Baudrillard's<sup>11</sup> simulacrum to structures of late capitalism): pose-modernism and hyper-modernism (admittedly ugly terms). 'Pose-modernism' refers, not to some constitutive textual structures or meanings but rather to a set of discursive practices which are only visible in the complex articulations within and among the various cultural media. It is the media's performance of particular poses – and a pose, however artificial and local, is never constituted merely by a single instance or image. Many of these practices are, in fact, modernist, but they are articulated differently as poses within the context of the media. But if they are poses, they also relate problematically to the real (that reality is nothing but poses is, of course, a pose: nothing matters and what if it did). Thus, the fact that certain media practices clearly challenge the line between the real and the image does not tell us what its effects are, or even what the practices themselves are, in the broader contexts of different media apparatuses or social formations.

'Hyper-modernism' points to the fact that many of the historical structures and experiences that so-called postmodernists describe depend upon the continuation, although perhaps re-articulation, of many of the structures and experiences of modernity. This is not to deny the emergence of new historical events (e.g., the destructability and disposability of the earth; significant redistributions of wealth, population and power; new structures of commodity production such as infotech; and new media of communication<sup>12</sup>) and of new historical experiences (e.g., that there are no transcendental values capable of giving shape and direction to our lives, a decreased faith in progress, new kinds of pessimism and cynicism). To draw upon Hall<sup>13</sup>, if reality was never as real as we have constructed it, it's not quite as unreal as we imagine it. If subjectivity was never as coherent as we imagine it, it's not quite so incoherent as we would like it to be. And if power was never as simple or monolithic as we dream it (reproducing itself, requiring giants and magical subjects to change it),

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<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *op cit.*

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (trans Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston), New York, Semiotexte, 1983.

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<sup>12</sup> It is quite common to find the emergence of postmodernity linked directly to the development of mass media. One can distinguish between those who see the media in epistemological terms, as a new mode of rationality (e.g., the Frankfurt School) and those who see it in ontological terms, as a new mode of Being (e.g., Baudrillard).

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, 'An Interview on Postmodernism and Articulation', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (forthcoming).

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it's not quite as dispersed and unchallengeable as we fear. The specificity of the contemporary social formation is more complex than simple descriptions of the simulacrum or late capitalism suggest, although these are both real events and have real effects. I want, then, to use postmodern theory to explicate the uneven and contradictory relations between the pose-modernism of the media and the hyper-modernism of contemporary life.

#### IV. Hitchhiking Across America

It is time to return to billboards, although the task is qualified in the context of postmodern theory. It is important not to confuse the project of looking at cultural practices as billboards to make visible particular levels of effects, structure and struggle, with postmodern theoretical practice. The conflation of these two seems to be a fundamental flaw in much postmodern criticism. In the first place, one is operating at a more abstract level than that of concrete media contexts involving concrete individuals. Postmodern critics often mythologise the US – they have the comfort of distance – by confusing its highways (certainly a real part), its surfaces, with its social life. There is no guarantee that effects on one level will appear in a corresponding form at another level; on the other hand, they must presumably be having effects, and those who would ignore the effectivity of surfaces fail to confront the media adequately. Thus, what I am proposing would be only part of a constant struggle to describe and articulate the relations of the media to social life and history.

In the second place, while the image of billboards (perhaps like that of the simulacrum) seems to collapse reality into its surface, postmodern theory reminds us that the surface is itself plural. That something does not immediately appear on the surface neither denies its reality nor prevents it from appearing on the surface at another place, from another set of positionings. But no structure is necessarily and always 'deeper' or somehow more real than that which appears on the surface. If we want to understand something that we intuitively recognise as US culture, which exists without any essential identity in many different local forms and contexts, then the commitment to localism is likely to either lead into indeterminacy or some sort of phenomenological attempt to reconstruct the locale. That is, without any maps, we have no idea about how to begin moving through the local contexts. Obviously, we are not entirely without maps: economic relations, ideological relations – semiotic and psychoanalytic, psychological effects, phenomenological structures. Each potentially enables us to chart a particular set of effects and to locate particular sites of power and struggle.

But none of these seems to explain the enormous power and popularity of the media, especially TV. In the United States, young children seem to favour their televisions over siblings and friends, often over their fathers

and, sometimes, even over their mothers. The 'popular', whatever its economic and ideological, effects may be, seems to work at yet another level (the affective<sup>14</sup>) and, in fact, the very notion of popularity (which entails certain kinds of investment of energy, e.g., enjoyment) seems to signal the unequal – and perhaps even unusual – weight of the affective. I want then, to read, across the broad landscape of US popular culture, television as billboards for certain affective structures that emerge from and impact upon every level of contemporary social life. Rather than talking about particular programmes or episodes, I want to talk about certain practices, gestures or statements (Foucault) that appear, in numerous forms, across different media and forms. The question is how they function in the affective economy of the popular, what they are 'announcing' to us on TV once we begin to follow the highways.

In fact, I want to talk about three related sets of such gestures: irony, repetition and excess, and the three forms of in-difference which they announce. The gesture and the annunciation are inseparable on the billboard. I have already said some things about the in-difference of television. To put it most bluntly, TV is in-different to differences even as it constructs differences out of the very absence of difference. I have also said something about the first of these billboards – the particular forms of media irony by which the media declare the in-difference of reality.<sup>15</sup> In a certain sense, everything becomes equal on TV (e.g., the late night talk show) by apparently erasing the line between image and reality. But it is not the case that everything is appropriated to become a media object; rather, their reality depends upon their already being such an image, speaking the discourses of TV. The *A-Team* can bring together, all battling on the side of justice (and the US), B A Barrakas (aka Mr T, as a quasi-

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<sup>14</sup> The question of affective economies is not equivalent to discourses of pleasure which function as the alibi for the deployment of sexuality. They articulate affective struggles into a limited set of structures: as a victim to be momentarily liberated because already repressed; as an excess never entirely recuperable; and as a dangerous distraction – the ultimate imaginary because it is so immediately real.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to deny that one needs to distinguish different forms of televisual irony.

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*The A-Team*: pop star Boy George mixes his media.

guerrilla), Hulk Hogan (a wrestler) and William 'The Refrigerator' Perry (a US football star). And at the end of the episode, as if to remind us that the line between television and reality is problematic, 'Refrig' gives that week's victims (now saved by the A-Team, Hulk and Refrig) a Chicago Bears hat, but BA and Hulk are quite annoyed at not having received their own. Moreover, in a few weeks, all of them will appear in a closed circuit, internationally broadcast wrestling extravaganza. More radically, consider the list of guest stars from programmes like *Miami Vice*, which has included not only rock and roll stars but politicians (negotiations are under way with Bush, and Kissinger and Ford have already appeared on *Dynasty*), criminals (G Gordon Liddy), business figures (Lee Ioacoca), columnists (Bob Greene), artists (Julian Beck), etc. Nowhere is television's indifference to reality marked on the screen so beautifully as by contemporary advertisements: in one particularly apt commercial for caffeine-free Pepsi, we are shown scenes of life in TV-land while the voice-over says, 'for those whose life is already exciting enough'. The point is not that the line has disappeared or that TV is somehow erasing it, but rather, that its effectivity is being changed by television's in-difference to it.

A second moment of television's in-difference, an in-difference of identity or meaning, is announced over and over again in the various forms of repetition that TV practices. It is the peculiar way in which television deals with the difference between the same and the different. One can recall Andy Warhol's attempt to distinguish his enjoyment in seeing the exact same thing over and over from the everyday pleasures of seeing almost the same thing over and over. But the distinction quickly collapses. At every level, television seems to be structured on repetition: episodes, character types, narratives, genres, programming (e.g., reruns and repeats), ads. Television is, at all these levels, the most predictable set of images one can imagine. Yet there are differences: whether one prime-time soap looks just like another, whether one episode of *Miami Vice* says the exact same thing as every other, somehow the pleasure of the viewing depends upon the ability to renegotiate the difference that difference makes. Baudrillard has pointed to the implosion of difference in the media and argued that, as a result, the media are indifferent to meaning. This is an argument against those who attempt to see reality represented in the media, or who attempt to understand the media's power in its repetition of (what is apparently almost always) the same message. Rather, I would argue that TV is in-different to meaning, i.e., that meaning is necessary but irrelevant; that TV moves through meaning to get somewhere else, and it doesn't particularly matter what meanings it uses. Its minimalism, its often cartoonish sense of reality is quite allowable because the point is not to communicate particular meanings as if they were structures to be lived in and experienced. Moreover, television does not need to worry about the line between realism and fantasy; it presents images of the in-difference of meaning, fantasy and reality (which is not to say that the viewer confuses these domains).

If the popularity of television programmes is not immediately dependent on ideological issues (e.g., a recent Feiffer cartoon of a woman in front of the set: 'Ronald Reagan talks to me on television. No nonsense . . . and sincere. Who cares if he's lying?'), perhaps we can get some grip on it by looking at a third set of gestures common, not only to TV, but to the range of popular media, namely, excess, which announces an in-difference of the norm (even as television constantly reinscribes it). Televisual excess takes many forms – visual excess, stylistic excess, verbal excess, imagistic excess (especially in its images of violence, wealth and sexual titillation), etc. But perhaps most important is what one might call emotional excess. Current TV's most powerful annunciation is its emotionalism, the fact that it is structured by a series of movements between extreme highs and extreme lows. It presents an image of an affective economy marked on the one side by an extreme (postmodern) cynicism ('life is hard and then you die') and, on the other, by an almost irrational celebration of the possibilities of winning against all odds. Often, these two are combined, as in the *Miami Vice* genre. While it is hard to know whether TV or reality is crazier and more unreal, it is clear that television is the site of emotions more 'real', and more intense than those we can comfortably claim for ourselves. It is almost as if, in various ways, viewers get to live out the emotional highs and lows of their lives on TV, as if they just want to feel something that strongly, no matter what it is ('I'd rather feel bad than not feel anything at all'), to feel what it's like to believe in something that strongly regardless of what it is ('I believe in the truth though I lie a lot'). And this does not require any simple identification, either with the camera (for we allow it to move as if by proxy), the characters (for they are typical and yet unlike us), or the narrative uncertainty (for one always knows how it will end).

Baudrillard argues that, with the implosion of difference, the indifference of meaning, reality too has collapsed into its model. The subject, the social, the political – all have become simulacra, located in a logic of deterrence which has redefined the operation of power. But Baudrillard confuses the collapse of an ideology of the real (including its various scenes) with the problematising of the link between ideology and reality. Again, it is not the social that has imploded but a particular ideological structuration (private/public) which seems no longer effective. Baudrillard makes the real into nothing but an effect of meaning so that when meaning collapses, the real must as well. But if, as I have argued, reality is more than meaning ('wild realism'), and if in fact meaning has not disappeared but merely been re-articulated into different relations within certain historical structures, then Baudrillard is less an analyst of our historical condition than another of its many billboards. Increasingly, reading Baudrillard is no different than watching *Miami Vice*. (As one friend told me, 'I dress like *Vice*, I talk like Baudrillard'. Again, there is no guarantee that this signals the commodification of knowledge rather than the emergence of new forms of popular intellect.) The social may not be meaningfully invoked (it may have lost its 'existential' meaning) but that doesn't mean it



is not still effectively constituted through other discursive effects. It is easy to lose sight of this gap when reading Baudrillard, just as it is when watching *Miami Vice*, because his writing, like the world he celebrates, moves so quickly that nothing is allowed to impinge upon it, nothing can break its slippery surface.

In particular, the televisual practices of excess point to an emerging historical contradiction between affect and ideology. If the relation between the two is normally anacletic, the postwar years have seen it broken. That is, at least a part of the structures of hypermodernism is marked by a series of events which challenged our ability to make sense of our relationship to our world and ourselves, to normality and the future. Not the least important of these events was the incorporation of such apocalyptic images into the mass media and popular culture. While history seemed to demand a different structure of affective investment, there seemed to be no way of making sense of the emerging struggle.

What appeared was a crisis in the relationship between common sense and faith. Within this gap, it is not the case that one doesn't live ideological values (or that nothing matters) but that these seem not to speak to our affective mood. It is as if one were to experience and in certain ways live values without actually investing in them (it doesn't matter what matters) because our affective investments seem to have already been determined elsewhere, in another scene. This structure – whether it has its own tradition or not – seems to have become increasingly dominant, a common announcement on our cultural billboards: images of the contradiction between contemporary affective organisations and the ideological appeals which attempt to articulate them. Thus, happiness becomes an impossible but necessary reality (a bit like *déjà vu* with amnesia) or rather, its possible ideological relevance collapses into its extreme affective images. It is as if our ideological maps and our 'mattering maps' were unable to intersect, unable to articulate one another. Each continues to exist with its own autonomy, although our sanity apparently demands their integration. It is no longer a matter of seeking, in culture, to articulate the new organisation of our affective relations to reality (as in much of high modernism), but rather of locating the site of the contradiction itself (pose-modernism).

Television announces that site in its own performance of *in-difference*, in its practices of irony, repetition and excess. It does more, however, for it also offers, in the apparatuses of its viewing, a strategic response to the contradiction between affect and ideology by placing the nomadic subject within an affective democracy which is, I believe, constitutive of almost all of the televisual apparatuses. In this particular economy, every image is equally open to affective investment because everything is a media event, a style, a pose. This doesn't mean that we don't live certain poses, or that we don't have to. But it also does not mean that we necessarily live in their ideological spaces even though we might speak some of their languages. The particular democratic form of this economy responds to the broad

ideological demands of subjectification and commodification. Both, as constant social positionings with their own pleasures and pains, negate the in-difference of affect, and thus, ultimately, the power of affect itself. TV re-establishes a site of and source for affective living within its democratic economy. It does this by constituting an empowering form of identity – the mundane exotic. It celebrates the ordinariness of the exotic and the exoticism of the ordinary. It locates identity in the absence of any difference by affectively investing in the difference of the same. Thus, the televisual star system is radically unlike the classic Hollywood version, for the contemporary star is, in most cases, necessarily like us in ways that violate the code of the Hollywood star system. Their fantastic difference is affectively empowered (as style and chance) and is effective only at that level.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the economy I have described is precisely that which is often attacked by many of television's ideological critics. But this economy may be an empowering one for many of its viewers precisely because it is not ideological. It is by now a common critical defence to argue that television's economy is a domestic one, built upon structures of security and comfort. TV is a domestic medium but it need not constantly domesticate every image; nor is it already domesticated, without any role in ongoing cultural struggles. TV is domestic in that it is in-different to the difference between subordination and resistance. It is both immensely public and intensely private and, once again, its power lies precisely on the line which marks the in-difference. Television is not often an active site of struggle but that does not mean it is not involved, in important and constant ways, through indirection, in active struggles.

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<sup>16</sup> Thus it is easy to see how a movie star could become a politician/ideologue. But a TV star? And it is easy to see why an ideologue could (and even has to) become a TV star. But a movie star? And for the beginnings of a comparison between the affective economies of TV and rock music, see Lawrence Grossberg, '“I'd Rather Feel Bad than Not Feel Anything at All”', *Rock and Roll, Pleasure and Power*, *Enclitic* 8, 1984, pp 94-110.

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I would like to thank Jon Crane for his valuable comments.

## CORRECTION

My introduction to the Winter 1987 *Screen* (vol 28 no 1), 'Difference and Its Discontents', has a major error on page 4: In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Macmillan, 1984), Teresa de Lauretis does not ignore Stephen Heath's 1978 'Difference' article. It is discussed in Chapter 1 and elsewhere in her book. My sincere apologies to Teresa de Lauretis and to readers for this misrepresentation of her arguments. – Mandy Merck



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# FROM HERE TO MODERNITY: FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM

BY BARBARA CREED

WHAT IS AT STAKE in the debate surrounding a possible intersection between feminist theory and postmodern theory? The future of feminist theory itself: its directions, theoretical bases, alignments? Is feminism a symptom or result of the postmodern condition or is feminism linked more directly to this crisis in theory? Alice Jardine and Craig Owens have explored the connections between feminism and postmodernism. A comparison of their work should prove helpful to the newcomer – myself included – who is attempting to negotiate what Owens rightly describes as a ‘treacherous course’ between the two.<sup>1</sup>

In ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism’, Owens argues that there is an ‘apparent crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation’ (p 59). Owens points out that his intention is not to propose a relationship of either ‘antagonism or opposition’ between the two (although at times he seems to do just this) but rather to explore this possible intersection in order ‘to introduce the issue of sexual difference into the modernism/postmodernism debate’, an issue of which this debate ‘has until now been scandalously in-different’ (p 59) – a debatable point.

According to Owens there are many areas where feminism is not only ‘compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought’ (p 62): both feminism and postmodernism endorse Lyotard’s argument that there is a crisis in the legitimising function of narrative, that the *grands récits* or Great Narratives of the West have lost credibility; both present a

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Owens, ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’ in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, USA, Bay Press, 1983, p 59. All page citations will be included in the text.

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Jardine, *Gynesis, Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985. All page citations will be included in the text.

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critique of representation, that 'system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others' (p 59); both agree that the 'representational systems of the West admit only one vision – that of the constitutive male subject' (p 58); both present a critique of binarism, that is, thinking by means of oppositions; both insist on the importance of 'difference and incommensurability' (pp 61-62); both seek to heal the breach between theory and practice and support an artistic strategy of 'simultaneous activity on multiple fronts' (p 63); both critique the privileging of vision as the superior sense and as the guarantor of truth. The difference, it appears, is that where postmodernism, defined as a cultural theory, sees itself as engaging in a debate with modernism, feminism identifies patriarchal ideology as its 'other'. For instance, in relation to the issue of vision, feminism 'links the privileging of vision with sexual privilege' (p 70), particularly in relation to the psychoanalytic theory of castration, whereas postmodernism situates the problem as one of 'modern aesthetics'. While there are some problems with Owens' argument, which I shall discuss below, I think he is correct to argue that there is a common ground shared by feminism and postmodernism.

In her book, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*<sup>2</sup>, Alice Jardine further explores this common ground. She concentrates her discussion of feminism and postmodernism on the relationship between contemporary French thought (the writings largely of male writers: Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Duras, Goux, Blanchot, Tournier), the process of 'gynesis' which she argues is central to these writings, and feminism. It is important to realise that Jardine is using the term 'modernity' in a specialised sense: although she writes that she is not certain if the word 'should or can be defined' as she uses it, she does actually offer a definition over the course of the book. First, however, she indicates what modernity does not mean: '... modernity should not be confused (as it most often is in the United States) with "modernism" – the generic label commonly attached to the general literary movement of the first half of the twentieth century' (p 23). Jardine uses the term 'modernity', which is used in France to refer to what is known 'more problematically in the United States [as] "post-modernism"' (p 22). (Because of Jardine's specialised use of the term, I shall also adopt her practice when referring to her work.)

The major question Jardine explores in *Gynesis* is this: '... are feminism and modernity oxymoronic in their terms and terminology? If so, how and why? If not, what new ruse of reason has made them appear – especially in France – to be so?' (p 22). The 'new ruse of reason' which Jardine isolates for analysis is a process that she defines as 'gynesis'. Gynesis, which Jardine argues has always been discernible in the religious and literary texts of the West, is a process of re-questioning and re-thinking – a process brought about by the collapse of the master narratives of the West and a re-examination of the main topics of philosophy: Man, Truth, History.

*In France, such rethinking has involved, above all, a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narrative's own 'non-knowledge,' what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a 'space' of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman. (p 25)*

Thus, gynesys represents a valorisation of the feminine or woman as intrinsic to the development of new postmodern modes of speaking and writing. However, it is important to stress, as Jardine does, that the process of gynesys is not necessarily about women or feminism. She points to the fact that the majority of writers in France, who are working in this area, deal almost exclusively with the fictional writings of men. For 'feminine writing' does not necessarily signify writing by a woman. Throughout *Gynesys*, Jardine refers to the general agreement amongst contemporary writers that in order to write the male poet must 'become a woman'. She cites the work of Deleuze and Guattari in which they:

*... refer to Virginia Woolf as having incorporated the process of what they call 'becoming woman' (le devenir femme) in her writing – but 'not to the same extent' as Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, or Henry Miller. (p 62)*

Gynesys is 'the putting into discourse of "woman" as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity ...' (p 25). Jardine points to the writings of Derrida, a philosopher whose work represents a fundamental critique of the Western philosophical tradition. In order to analyse the symbolic function, he employs terms such as 'hymen' and 'the invaginated text'. She also refers to a similar process at work in other writers:

*... 'she' may be found in Lacan's pronouncements on desire ... Deleuze's work on becoming woman; Jean-François Lyotard's calls for a feminine analytic relation; Jean Baudrillard's work on seduction; Foucault's on madness; Goux's on the new femininity; Barthes's in general; Michel Serres's desire to become Penelope or Ariadne. ... 'She' is created from the close explorations of semantic chains whose elements have changed textual as well as conceptual positions, at least in terms of valorization: from time to space, the same to other, paranoia to hysteria, city to labyrinth, mastery to nonmastery, truth to fiction.*

*As Stephen Heath has put it in his essay on difference, today that which is designated unrepresentable is what is finally the most strongly represented. (p 38)*

Jardine argues that modernity signifies a 'redefinition of the world' brought about by the 'complex destructuring, disintegration, of the founding structures in the West'. Modernity represents an attempt to take those terms which are 'not attributable to Man: the spaces of the *en-soi*, Other, without history – the feminine' and to give these spaces a 'new language' (pp 72-73).

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, Vol 10, Manchester University Press, 1984.

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*Here we are at the heart of gynesys. To give a new language to these other spaces is a project filled with both promise and fear, however, for these spaces have hitherto remained unknown, terrifying, monstrous: they are mad, unconscious, improper, unclean, non-sensical, oriental, profane. If philosophy is truly to question those spaces, it must move away from all that has defined them, held them in place: Man, the Subject, History, Meaning. It must offer itself over to them, embrace them. But this is also a dangerous and frightening task, for, as Walter Benjamin put it: 'It is a metaphysical truth . . . that all of nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language' (p 73)*

In her discussion of the 'destructuring' and 'disintegration' of the foundations of Western society, Jardine emphasises various areas of collapse which are of particular relevance to this discussion and which were also specified by Owens in his discussion: the collapse of the master narratives of the West; the breakdown of the paternal metaphor; the crisis in representation; the decentring of the subject; the critique of binarism.

### I. THE COLLAPSE OF THE MASTER NARRATIVE

Both Jardine and Owens discuss the work of Lyotard and his theory of the collapse of the master narrative. In *The Postmodern Condition*<sup>3</sup>, Lyotard discusses in detail the question of knowledge and the problem of its legitimation in so-called advanced societies given what he sees as a collapse of the *grands récits* or Great Narratives, that is, narratives which have been used to legitimate the quest for knowledge and the importance of scientific research. There are two major forms of the legitimation narrative. In the first, the narrative of emancipation, the people are the subject of science. Here, it is argued that through scientific research man will eventually create a society free from poverty and injustice. According to this narrative legitimation, all research undertaken by members of the general scientific community is justified because it will eventually lead to an improvement in the lives of the people. In the second major narrative of legitimation, the speculative mind, the practice of philosophy, is the subject of science. Here, knowledge is sought for its own sake on the assumption that every small contribution will eventually lead to an advancement in the totality of knowledge.

According to Lyotard, neither of these two narratives can now be used to justify scientific research. This crisis of legitimation has been partly brought about by the breakdown in the belief that a unified totality of knowledge is possible and that if it were it would necessarily benefit humankind. Citing the way in which the techno-sciences can be said to have increased rather than alleviated disease, Lyotard critiques the very idea of progress:

*One can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the two last centuries in the idea of progress. The idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was*

rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

He points out that although there were disagreements, even wars, over the 'name of the subject' to be liberated, the contestants agreed that activities were 'legitimate' if they contributed to the eventual liberation of humankind. However:

*After two centuries, we are more sensitive to signs that signify the contrary. Neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind.*<sup>5</sup>

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard partly defines the postmodern as a condition in which the 'grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation'.<sup>6</sup> He argues that we cannot hope to know the origin of this incredulity, all we can do is map its existence and its manifestations. Owens translates *grand récit* first as 'master narrative' and then as 'narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature'.<sup>7</sup> He claims that not only is the status of narrative in question but also that of representation, specifically man's androcentric representation of the world in which he has constructed himself as 'subject'. Owens argues that here feminism and postmodernism share common ground – both present a critique of forms of narrative and representation which place man as subject. Owens points to the visual arts where he argues 'symptoms' of man's 'recent loss of mastery' are most apparent: the multiplicity of signs of mastery; a mourning of loss; images of phallic woman. While I think that Owens' comments are valid – there is a crossing of both the feminist and postmodern critiques of narrative and representation – I am not certain that Lyotard's *grand récit* is the same as Owens' 'narratives of mastery', nor am I convinced that the master narrative crisis is necessarily beneficial to women – a point that Meaghan Morris<sup>8</sup> raises in her work on Lyotard.

First, Lyotard is addressing narratives of legitimation and a crisis which is essentially a crisis in the status of knowledge – that is, a crisis in the ability to decide what is true and just, a crisis in the validity of the social contract between governments and the people. This crisis is not the same as the one pointed to by Owens at the outset of his article as 'a crisis of cultural authority', which he situates as a crisis in representation and narrative specifically in relation to the representation of man as 'subject' within the signifying practices of Western patriarchal societies. Owens' conceptualisation of this crisis, however, does represent the feminist position.

If Lyotard has pointed to the crisis of the master narrative in terms of 'legitimacy', Laura Mulvey's work on cinema has raised questions about a different kind of narrative crisis – one based in questions of sexual differ-

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'Defining The Postmodern', *Postmodernism*, ICA Documents 4, London, 1986, p 6.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p 6.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, *op cit*, p 37.

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Owens, *op cit*, p 65.

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<sup>8</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Postmodernity and Lyotard's Sublime', *Art & Text*, 16, Summer, 1984/5, p 51.

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<sup>9</sup> (Jardine notes that feminist film theory, unlike many other feminist areas, has already addressed itself to postmodern theory, *op cit*, p 75.) See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18; and 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" . . . Inspired by *Duel in The Sun*', *Framework*, 15/16/17, 1981, pp 12-15.

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ence and brought about by the self-aggrandising structures of the unconscious of patriarchal society.<sup>9</sup> The feminist critique of *classic* narrative, with which it is mainly concerned, comes from a different theoretical basis and addresses itself to a different theoretical object, although both agree that there is a crisis of narrative which has shaken the credibility of the major institutions of the West. Whereas feminism would attempt to explain that crisis in terms of the workings of patriarchal ideology and the oppression of women and other minority groups, postmodernism looks to other possible causes – particularly the West's reliance on ideologies which posit universal truths – Humanism, History, Religion, Progress, etc. While feminism would argue that the common ideological position of all these 'truths' is that they are patriarchal, postmodern theory – as I understand it – would be reluctant to isolate a single major determining factor.

Craig Owens argues that the postmodern debate has been 'scandalously in-different' to the issue of sexual difference; however, it would be more accurate to say that *some* writers have been indifferent. Jardine points out that, although Lyotard does not take up the issue of the paternal signifier as a major theme in his discussion of the postmodern crisis in narrative, 'he makes it clear that the crisis is not sexually neutral'.

*He does this primarily through his descriptions of the only viable source and place he sees for legitimacy in postmodern culture: 'para-logic'. This kind of logic is dependent upon and valorizes the kinds of incomplete 'short stories' historically imbedded, hidden, within so-called 'scientific' or 'objective' discourse: the kinds of short narratives that this discourse attempts to evacuate in order to shore up its 'Truths'. (p 66)*

Jardine explains that the elements of these short narratives constitute what Lyotard describes in another article as 'a feminine relation of ductility and ductibility, polymorphism. . . . women are discovering something that could cause the greatest revolution in the West, something that (masculine) domination has never ceased to stifle: there is no signifier, or else, the class above all classes is just one among many . . .' (p 66). On the basis of such comments, which clearly raise the issue of sexual difference, Jardine claims that it is important to recognise 'that delegitimation, experienced as crisis, is the loss of the paternal fiction, the West's heritage and guarantee . . .' (p 67). Unlike Owens, she does not reduce Lyotard's *grands récits* to 'narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature' but rather analyses the nature of the crisis as an experience of 'the loss of the paternal signifier' – a different proposition altogether and one which provides us with a more helpful basis from which to discuss this crisis of narrative in relation to feminist theory, postmodernism and the cinema.

I would like to relate this discussion to Fredric Jameson's argument about postmodernism and the nostalgia film. Jameson discusses this phenomenon without any reference to feminism or questions of sexual difference, apparently 'in-different' to these issues in a context where, I would have thought, they were crucial. Jameson argues that the changes currently taking place in post-industrial society have been registered in the post-modern fascination for the nostalgia film. He sees a 'desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past'<sup>10</sup> in films such as *American Graffiti*, *Rumble Fish*, *Chinatown*, *The Conformist*, *Body Heat*. He refers to 'the colonization' of our immediate past and argues that the preference for films which rely on quotation (of past versions, other remakes, the original novel, etc) represents an attempt to construct '... "intertextuality"' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of "pastness" and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history'. Jameson sees this 'mesmerizing new aesthetic mode ... as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way ...'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, July-August, 1984, p 66.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, pp 67 and 68.



*Body Heat*: colonising the Hollywood past.

In an earlier article, Jameson discussed another category of films (*Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Arc*) which, while not strictly historical, recreate cultural experiences in the form of pastiche as well as reawakening a sense

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<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, op cit, p 116.

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of the past in the viewer. Jameson argues that for those who grew up in the '30s to the '50s one of the major cultural forms was the adventure serial, awash with 'alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress'. He argues that a film like *Star Wars*:

*... reinvents this experience in the form of a pastiche: that is, there is no longer any point to a parody of such serials since they are long extinct. Star Wars, far from being a pointless satire of such now dead forms, satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again. This film is thus metonymically a historical or nostalgia film. . . .*<sup>12</sup>

What is most interesting about Jameson's otherwise incisive observations is that he does not analyse this longing for the 'past'. Exactly what is it that modern audiences wish to feel nostalgic about? Does this nostalgia take a different form for men and women? Since Jameson refers to two different forms of the nostalgia film – the period recreation and the adventure film – I shall discuss this question in relation to each.

The intensely polarised gender roles of the adventure serial, with its true heroes and distressed heroines, invoke a desire to re-live a 'time' when gender roles were more clearly defined, stable, predictable. I am not arguing that this 'time' was the '30s or the '50s; it may be that audiences of those decades were also watching the serials in order to satisfy their desire to relive an imaginary order – an order where gender identity was secure and appeared to validate the social contract established by the myth of romantic love. Given the current crisis in gender roles, often cited as an instance of postmodernism and certainly represented in the cinema, and audience incredulity in the face of cinematic derring-do, films like *Raiders of the Lost Arc* are required both to romanticise and parody the roles of hero and heroine. (I would also include *Crocodile Dundee* in this category.)

The problem with Jameson's argument is that he situates that 'older period' literally in the past; he does not consider the possibility that all generations may have similar longings (although often tempered with cynicism), and that the cinema, along with other forms of popular culture, addresses these longings in different ways and through different filmic modes across the decades. It is difficult to see how Jameson could embark on such an analysis without considering the theoretical work already undertaken by feminism in this area in relation to questions of desire and the construction of sexual difference in the cinema.

Jameson's discussion of the history/nostalgia film also suffers from a similar lack. Given Lyotard's comments about the attempts of the patriarchal order to disguise the fact that 'there is no signifier', isn't it possible that the 'missing past' which lies at the heart of these films is that which once validated the paternal signifier? Significantly, at least three of the

films quoted by Jameson, *Chinatown*, *The Conformist* and *Body Heat*, belong to the category of *film noir*, a genre which deliberately plays with the notion of the *femme fatale*, the phallic mother whose image constantly threatens to undermine the phallogentric order and turn son against father. In each of these re-makes the male protagonist fails in his self-appointed task, largely because the patriarchal symbolic, the Law, has also failed – reduced already to the status of just one ‘class’ among many, to cite Lyotard again. In *Chinatown* (the title itself is used as a metaphor for corruption at all levels of city government), all characters – including the hero – have a ‘past’. The possibility of incest, symbolically alluded to in the ’40s *noir* film, has become a reality in *Chinatown*; it signifies the complete failure of the symbolic order. In *The Conformist* the four symbolic fathers (Italo, Quadri, Mussolini and the hero’s own ‘mad’ father) all signify the end of an order and a failure of ‘truth’ suggested by the myth of Plato’s cave<sup>13</sup>; while *Body Heat* alludes continuously, through its references to earlier *films noirs*, to the failure of the paternal figure and the power of the phallic mother.

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<sup>13</sup> See Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985, for a fascinating reinterpretation of Plato’s myth of the cave.

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*Chinatown*: the *femme fatale* as phallic mother.

In her discussion of the differences between French and North American versions of gynesis, Jardine argues that contemporary texts by male writers in North America have not been influenced by gynesis as an ‘abstract, conceptual process’. ‘Gynesis – the putting into discourse of “woman” or the “feminine” as problematic – seems to exist here only at the level of *representation*. It has, in a sense, been externalized rather than internalized, and thematized rather than practiced. . . .’ (p 236). In a footnote,

she adds: 'In some ways, the American version of gynesis is more prevalent in "popular culture" than it is in "high theory" – especially in film.' We can see this process at work in Jameson's postmodern filmography.

### III. GYNESIS, POSTMODERNISM AND THE SCI-FI HORROR FILM

Jardine maintains that within gynesis the 'feminine' signifies, not woman herself, but those 'spaces' which could be said to conceptualise the master narrative's own 'non-knowledge', that area over which the narrative has lost control. This is the unknown, the terrifying, the monstrous – everything which is not held in place by concepts such as Man, Truth, Meaning. Interestingly, she does not claim that this situation is new; in fact, she stresses the importance of remembering:

*That of all the words used to designate this space (now unbound) – nature, Other, matter, unconscious, madness, hylé, force – have throughout the tenure of Western philosophy carried feminine connotations (whatever their grammatical gender). . . . Those connotations go back, at the very least, to Plato's chora. Julia Kristeva has pointed out that space in general has always connoted the female: 'Father's Time, mother's species,' as Joyce put it; and, indeed, when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the space generating and forming the human species than of time, becoming, or history. (pp 88-89)*

The sci-fi horror film's current interest in the maternal body and processes of birth points to changes taking place on several fronts. Among the most important of these are the developments taking place in reproductive technology which have put into crisis questions of the subject, the body and the unconscious. Lyotard draws attention to this. In a discussion on architecture and the postmodern, he speaks of the fact that the mother's body, the infant's first home, is under threat; given the possibility of birth taking place in an artificial womb, we may well in our lifetimes witness the 'disappearance of that first dwelling'.

*My question is the following: the body is to my mind an essential site of resistance, because with the body there is love, a certain presence of the past, a capacity to reflect, singularity – if this body is attacked, by techno-science, then that site of resistance can be attacked. What is the unconscious of a child engendered in vitro? What is its relationship with the mother and with the father?<sup>14</sup>*

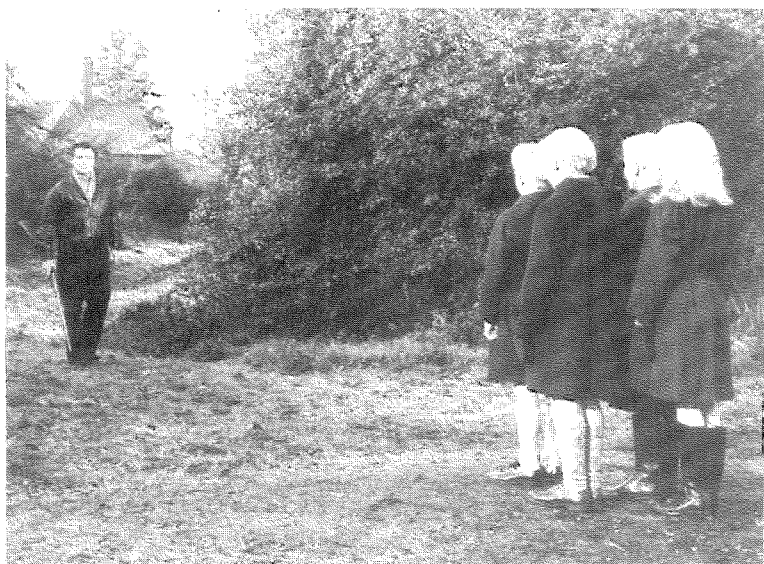
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<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'A Response To Kenneth Frampton', *Postmodernism*, op cit, p 31.

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The sci-fi horror film, I would argue, is using the body of woman not only to explore these possibilities in a literal sense but also as a metaphor for the uncertainty of the future – the new, unknown, potentially creative and potentially destructive future. The threat offered by the 'alien' creature, particularly the alien that impregnates woman, is also one of an

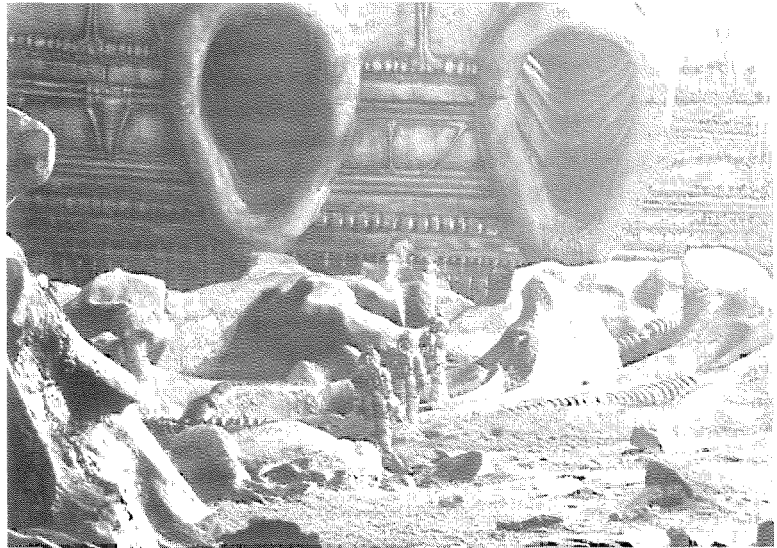
uncertain future. The theme of birth and the possibility of new modes of conception and procreation is, of course, not new to science fiction. Over the decades the sci-fi horror film has dealt with scientific alternatives to human conception (the Frankenstein films); other modes of sexual reproduction (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*); parthenogenetic modes of conception (*The Thing*); cloning (*The Boys From Brazil*); the transformation of robots into human beings (*D.A.R.Y.L.*); and the impregnation of women by aliens (*I Married a Monster From Outer Space*, *Village of the Damned*, *Xtro*, *Inseminoid*). There is even a soft-porn film based on the latter – a deliberate parody of *Xtro* called *Wham Bang! Thank You Mr Spaceman*.



*Village of the Damned*:  
the alien offspring.

In more recent years, as experiments with reproductive technology have begun to make enormous headway, the sci-fi horror film has become increasingly preoccupied with alternative forms of the conception-gestation-birth process. One of the most interesting and significant developments in the genre has been a concentration on imagery connected with the female reproductive cycle. The latter is most thoroughly explored in films such as *Xtro*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Inseminoid*, the John Carpenter remake of *The Thing*, *Alien* and *Aliens*. A study of these films, particularly the last three, reveals a fascination with the maternal body – its inner and outer appearance, its functions, its awesome powers. In many of these texts, it is not the body of the human/earth woman which is being explored but rather the ‘bodies’ of female alien creatures whose reproductive systems both resemble the human and are coded as a source of abject horror and overpowering awe. In the final scenes of *Aliens* we confront the

Mother Alien – a monstrous, deadly procreative machine, prepared to protect her young at all costs – primitive, amoral, female. In the two *Alien* films, this coding is taken to extremes – virtually all aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are designed to signify the female: womb-like interiors, fallopian-tube corridors, small claustrophobic spaces.



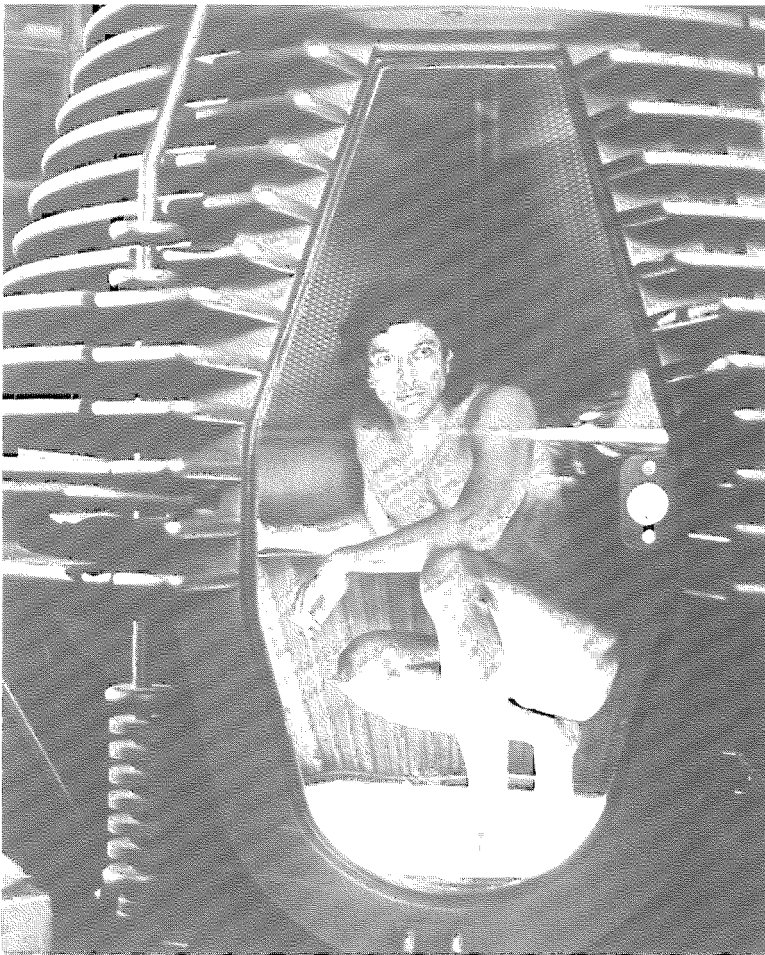
*Alien*: vaginal *mise-en-scène*.

*Xtro* pushed the birth-potential of woman's body to extremes; woman is impregnated by an alien, and a short time later gives birth to a fully-grown man. Here, the body becomes a site of the 'unknown' – physically capable of mating with the 'other', able to expand like a balloon, without physical limits. In *Inseminoid*, woman is impregnated by an alien, later giving birth to two monstrous half-human twins who, it is indicated, will eventually return to Earth and wreak havoc on the planet. In the remake of *The Fly*, the heroine wakes up from a nightmare in which she sees herself giving birth to a giant maggot. In *The Brood*, woman gives birth to a monstrous brood of dwarf children in a symbolic materialisation of her inner rage. Her womb is a large sac attached to the side of her stomach. In the final scenes, when her husband secretly watches a birth, he is repelled and disgusted, particularly when she bites through the umbilical cord and looks up at him, her face smeared with blood. In *Aliens* human bodies become nests for alien embryos; when the alien infant is ready to hatch it gnaws its way through the stomach. The human body, both male and female, has become a cocoon for a hostile life form. Why this preoccupation with the maternal body, processes of birth, monstrous offspring, the alien nature of woman, her maternal powers – and most recently the representation of the male body as 'womb'? I would argue it is because the body, particularly woman's body, through the process of *gyne*sis, has come to signify

the spaces of the unknown, the terrifying, the monstrous. This would register Lyotard's concern about the body losing its capacity to function as 'an essential site of resistance' – clearly a postmodern anxiety.

I think we can also see this process of gynesesis at work in the cinema's increasing preoccupation with the theme of 'becoming woman' – literally. If a collapse of the symbolic function gives rise to what Jardine describes as 'an inability of words to give form to the world' then this may well lead to a struggle to control that which has discredited the paternal function – the 'space which has begun to threaten all forms of authorship (paternity)'. The new theoretical discourses (feminism? postmodernism?) which have begun to take the place of the master discourses, seeing themselves as no longer in 'a system of loans and debts to former master truths' have, according to Jardine, begun to conceptualise a new space, that of woman (p 100).

The theme of 'becoming woman' is explored symbolically in the horror



*The Fly*: the male scientist reborn.



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<sup>15</sup> Tania Modleski, 'The Terror of Pleasure, The Contemporary Horror Film' in Tania Modleski (ed), *Studies in Entertainment, Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1986.

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, op cit, p 133.

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<sup>17</sup> Pete Boss, 'Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine', *Screen*, Jan-Feb 1986, vol 27 no 1, pp 14-24.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p 24.

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film (*Psycho*, *Dressed To Kill*) and literally in those sci-fi films in which man either gives birth to 'another' (*Alien* and *Aliens*) or in which he gives birth to himself (*Altered States*, *The Terminator*) or to himself as another life form (*The Thing*, *The Fly*). I am not suggesting that this is a new theme; it is dealt with in all the mad-scientist films in which man attempts to create his own life forms in the laboratory – the scientist as Mother/God. However, in the contemporary text, there has been an intensification in the exploration of 'becoming woman'. Most critical articles written on cross-dressing in the cinema rarely consider the possibility that man, at an unconscious level, may well desire to 'become woman' (*Tootsie*, *Some Like It Hot*). In France this possibility is treated with seriousness – a male poet must become a woman in order to write. Deleuze and Guattari, of course, have written at length about the whole world 'becoming woman', although this again has little to do with actual women.

In her article on postmodern theory, 'The Terror of Pleasure'<sup>15</sup>, Tania Modleski analyses *Videodrome* in these terms; the hero having been subjected to 'massive doses of a video signal' not only discovers he can no longer distinguish reality from fantasy but also that his body, completely unable to resist attack, has become a video terminal. Modleski draws attention to the fact that the wound which opens up in his stomach, into which the video cassette is inserted, is 'gaping' and 'vagina-like'. He has become – to cite Baudrillard – 'a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence'<sup>16</sup>.

Modleski – and Pete Boss<sup>17</sup> in the 'Body Horror' issue of *Screen* – sees films such as these, in which there is a breakdown in distinctions between subject and object, as postmodern. The individual is a prey to everything, unable to produce the limits of his own body or being. In defining the postmodern, Boss argues that the 'categories of Otherness which traditionally functioned in the horror film are no longer adequate'<sup>18</sup>, a distinction which I think – in the light of Jardine's work – needs further qualification. Traditional concepts of Otherness may currently be rejected (or embraced?), yet they may well emerge in a new form. It is relevant to note that the male protagonist of *Videodrome* also inserts his gun into the vagina-like wound in his stomach – his gun as symbolic phallus, like the cassette, signifies a different narrative, one in which he is man violating himself-as-woman. Significantly, his desire to experiment with videodrome was aroused by the masochistic desires of his female lover. He eventually takes her desires as his own. Clearly, one way of analysing the process in which man becomes woman is to regard it, from a male perspective, as the ultimate scenario of powerlessness, the ultimate violation of the body. In *Alien* the scenes in which man 'conceives' and gives birth through his stomach are represented as major scenarios of horror: the oral 'impregnation' of the man, the details of the birth scene, his pain, the savage tearing apart of his stomach, the horrified faces of the crew – all of these are shown in graphic detail.



*Videodrome*: the phallic pistol and the vaginal wound.

In Cronenberg's *The Fly*, a witty pastiche of the horror genre, 'becoming woman' is represented as a true metamorphosis comparable to the one in Kafka's novel. When a woman appears on the scene, the male scientist suddenly realises why his experiments are not working – he is ignorant of the flesh, the body. Woman signifies carnal pleasure: man is intellectual, remote from the body. She awakens his libido, he is able to progress with his research. Not until he begins the metamorphosis does he experience bodily pleasures to the full. Through the metaphor of the body, the film draws parallels between the woman and the fly – reinforced by the nightmare in which she gives birth to a gigantic maggot. The film plays continually with audience expectations of 'bad taste' and always manages to go one step further. In the final scene the connections are developed through the *mise-en-scène*. The metamorphosis is complete and the giant insect advances menacingly towards the 'castrated' male victim (he has lost several limbs), recalling a similar scene from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* in which the hero falls victim to a giant black spider – compared through cross-cutting with his wife. Through the early stages of the metamorphosis, the fly is referred to as the 'Brundle-fly' – it is a cross between man and fly. Not until the metamorphosis is complete does man fully signify the female – a monstrous fetishised insect. Interestingly, Jardine in her discussion of the process of becoming woman in the texts of French male writers, particularly Deleuze and Guattari, refers to a metamorphosis.

*For what is involved here is le devenir femme de tout le monde, the becom-*

ing woman of everyone, everything, the whole world. With D&G, 'to become woman' is less a metaphor for describing a certain social or textual process than a true metamorphosis – one thinks of Kafka's Gregor Samsa waking up as a bug. (pp 214-215)

*The Fly*: male  
intellect + female  
carnality =  
metamorphosis.



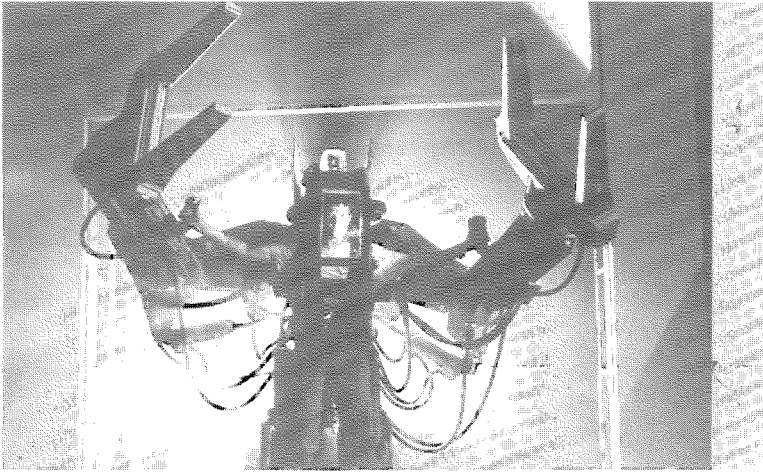
#### IV. FEMINISM AND GYNESIS: THE SEARCH FOR THE MOTHER

*The interrogative return to the sources of our knowledge in the West has involved an obligatory return to the mother's body – a female body, no matter how unrecognizable; no matter how hysterical, textual, inanimate, or actual. – Gynesis, p 237.*

Throughout her book Jardine distinguishes between texts of gynesism written by men and texts by women, although she primarily addresses herself to the former. In her final chapters, she draws attention to the fact that most of the significant women writers and theorists in France are also involved in the re-working of 'male' and 'female' in a process of gynesism. She raises, but does not answer, the question of whether or not they are writing 'woman' differently. Whatever the answer to this question, one thing is certain – in the writings of French women theorists we can clearly discern what might be described as 'a quest for the mother'. This search is evident in Kristeva's work on the 'semiotic chora', Irigaray's concept of woman and 'two-lipped discourse' and Cixous's theory of 'feminine writing'. Such a search is an ancient theme – the mother Demeter's search for her daughter Persephone. This narrative has also been explored in the cinema (*Marnie*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Imitation of Life*, *Now Voyager*) but not until recently, with the release of *Aliens*, has the mother-daughter quest

been represented from a perspective other than that of the paternal signifier.

Like Demeter, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the heroine of *Aliens*, enters the underworld in order to search for Newt, her missing 'surrogate'



*Aliens* : Ripley confronts the monstrous mother.

daughter who has been snatched away by the Queen of Hell – the Mother Alien. The quest splits the feminine into 'bad' (Alien) and 'good' (Ripley) mothers: in the final combat, Ripley confronts the monstrous mother whom she must destroy if she is to save her 'daughter' and herself. None of the three stands in a biological relation with either of the others; the configurations of the mother-daughter constellations are multiply, and contradictorily, symbolic. It is the lethal Mother Alien who bears children (Ripley has none of her own) yet threatens Newt. Occupying the place conventionally assigned to the hero, Ripley must eventually confront the Queen Alien – a contemporary version of the Sphinx.

Mother Alien, half-human and half-creature, embodies the narrative enigma. She is revealed as the source of the terror and the key to the film's mystery. Where are the aliens coming from? What are their origins? Can the source be destroyed? Can their birth processes be stopped? Like Oedipus, Ripley must encounter the Sphinx but not on the road to Thebes. The confrontation takes place in the Mother's incubation chamber, where Ripley watches in horror as countless eggs drop from the Alien's enormous ovipositor. In the combat that follows, Ripley launches a series of grenades into the Mother's egg sac, tearing it apart from within. Finally, her vast incubator in a state of total destruction, the floor littered with broken eggs, the enraged Mother pursues Ripley and Newt. The 'scene of creation' has been destroyed. On her journey of self-discovery, Ripley has encountered the generative aspect of femininity and demolished it. She has annihilated

the biological definition of motherhood (woman-as-breeding-machine). Has Ripley, the woman-hero, been enlisted to destroy 'herself' in the interests of a new society where birth is under the control of science and technology? If we draw the parallel between the two monstrous creatures still closer, we could argue that the Alien, like the Sphinx, is the origin of the plague (birth as an uncontrolled, amoral activity) which is destroying the city. After Oedipus destroyed the Sphinx he then became the source of the plague: does this mean that Ripley, and whatever signifies her 'plague', will also threaten the city when she returns to Earth?



*Aliens*: the hybrid heroine rescues the child.

Because Ripley is uncertain of her final destination (is she a 'new' woman? a mother? both?), positioned as subject (woman-as-hero) encountering herself as 'other' (the generative female), signifying the conventional characteristics of both woman ('intuitive', 'emotional', 'mother-

ing') and man ('brave', 'intelligent', 'saviour'), she emerges as what Vladimir Propp has described as a 'hybrid' figure<sup>19</sup>. Ripley is a heroine whose representation derives from a period of profound social and cultural change; she embodies both male and female gender characteristics with ease and intelligence. Her representation does not involve simple role reversal, a factor made clear by the contrasted figure of the tough woman trooper, Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein) who is more heroic than most of the men. *Aliens* is extremely self-conscious about its play with gender roles – and funny: in the final scenes the only 'man' at Ripley's side is the android Bishop, who has been severed at the waist by the Mother Alien. He is literally 'half-a-man'.

It is refreshing to note the increasing tendency in contemporary texts to play with the notion of manhood. Figures such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger (once described by an Australian critic as 'a condom stuffed with walnuts') could only be described as 'performing the masculine'. Both actors often resemble an anthropomorphised phallus, a phallus with muscles, if you like. (Parodies of a lost ideal or menacing images of an android future?) They are simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight, a casualty of the failure of the paternal signifier and the current crisis in master narratives.

Here it is relevant to note that the process of 'becoming woman' does have a related, although not identical, counterpart in the increasing emphasis on the androgynous figure in popular culture (Boy George, Laurie Anderson) and the woman/man in the cinema (*Victor/Victoria*,

<sup>19</sup> For a commentary on this, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1984, pp 113-116.



*Victor/Victoria*: portrait of the postmodern androgyne?

*Second Serve*). Once again this is not new – cults of the androgyne have occurred throughout history. In sixteenth century Venice, the authorities became so concerned with the fashion in women's clothing and hairstyle that they passed a law forbidding gender confusion of this kind with the threat of excommunication.<sup>20</sup> Lyotard argues that the creation of a social-psychological androgyne is one of the major goals of a society organised around the continual circulation of exchange objects. But this post-modern fascination with the androgyne and the 'neuter' subject may indicate a desire *not* to address problems associated with the specificities of the oppressive gender roles of patriarchal society, particularly those constructed for women. The postmodern fascination with the 'new', with breaking down boundaries, could well prove inimical to the development of theory if the 'old' is denied proper analysis and understanding.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In her final chapters, Jardine argues that it would be 'a fatal mistake' for feminism to ignore or dismiss modernity as just 'one more "male concept," participated in and theorized and fictionalized by men, for men' (p 257). Not only would such a stance increase 'the dangers of anachronism' – the feminist repetition of the humanist errors of the modern period, re-centring a Cartesian Woman Subject, with Woman's Truth and Woman's History – it would also close down the possibilities of 'developing radically new fields of conceptuality essential to feminist theory and practice today' (p 258). While I agree with Jardine that either tactic would indeed be a 'fatal mistake', I am not convinced that for 'modernity and feminism to unite in their efforts' is necessarily the answer.

Jardine doesn't specify the terms of this alliance, but one can foresee major problems. First, any attempt to assimilate feminism to postmodernism may well result in a confusion over terms, as revealed in the way in which Lyotard's notion of the grand narrative has been misleadingly reduced to 'master' narrative; such confusion only serves to undermine the specificities of the positions of both feminism and postmodernism. Second, as I have attempted to demonstrate, some theorists of the post-modern – such as Jameson – have been completely indifferent to feminism and its theorisation of the current crisis; this has resulted, in some instances, in an inadequate analysis of the postmodern film. Third, writers such as Owens, in his attempt to 'introduce' feminism into the postmodern debate, do so on terms which situate feminism as if it were a 'guest', the other brought in from the cold to join the 'host'. Owens never considers the possibility that feminist theory may not see itself as marginal to post-modernism and wish to join the club. Fourth, according to my reading of the changes presently occurring in the cinema, the crisis of the master narratives may not necessarily benefit women. Nor, even if there is a process of gynesia at work in the cinema, particularly in the sci-fi horror film,

is it yet clear whether this also will be of benefit to women. At the moment it is too early to predict future directions. As Jardine states repeatedly throughout her study, questions concerning the relationship of women to the processes of modernity 'may be unanswerable for some time to come' (p 117): gynesis, as written by men, could well prove to be a 'new ruse of reason'.

Finally, it may be possible that postmodern theory is more in debt to feminism than it is prepared to acknowledge. Jardine discusses the work of Rosa Braidotti, who argues that historical crises in the West's systems of knowledge have occurred when women have played a more prominent – some would argue decisive – role in periods of change. Jardine refers to at least three epochs in which it is possible to specify such an historical 'coincidence': the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – the period of the famous *Querelle des femmes*; the time of the French Revolution and the Saint-Simoniens; and the present crisis ushered in by the events of post-1968 France which occurred simultaneously with the rise of the women's movement. Jardine suggests an hypothesis: 'might it not be that a series of if not causal at least etiological links could be established between those periods in the West when women were most vocally polemical and those so called "epistemological breaks"?' (p 93).

The title of this article was originally intended to designate the strategy of a feminism speaking from a position not identical to that which Jardine calls 'modernity' and others 'postmodernism'. I wanted to keep a tension, a space between the two. Having travelled a little way down the road, trying to negotiate Craig Owens' 'treacherous course', I am glad I did not try to unite them. Any attempt to speak from a 'place' is immediately rendered problematic by the fact that one of the positions central to postmodernism is that there are no places left from which to speak – there are no 'Truths', 'Beliefs', or 'Positions'. Yet, this is in itself a position, and one now in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy. Even, perhaps, a master discourse? The paradox in which we feminists find ourselves is that while we regard patriarchal discourses as fictions, we nevertheless proceed as if our position, based on a belief in the oppression of women, were somewhat closer to the truth. Perhaps Lyotard is 'correct' (sic) to recommend at least the provisional abandonment of all 'Truths' in favour of the short narratives which the master discourses have attempted to suppress in order to validate their own positions. It would therefore be crucial that any theoretical discourse which emerges from the current crisis should not attempt to explain 'everything', to become a totalising theory, be it feminism or postmodernism.

Many thanks to Freda Freiberg and Merrilee Moss for their lively discussions and to Bill Routt for reading through this article and making many incisive contributions.

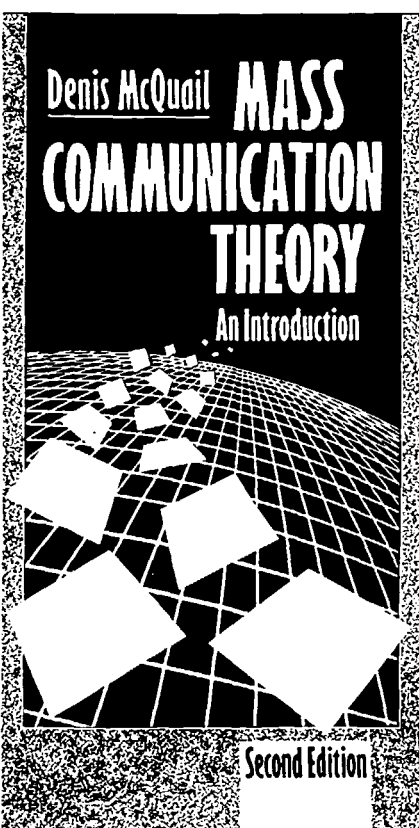


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# CRITICAL THEORY AND THE PARADOX OF MODERNIST DISCOURSE

BY RICHARD ALLEN

## Meaning and Presence: Generating the Paradox

*When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. . . . Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.*

– Saint Augustine<sup>1</sup>

WITH THIS QUOTATION from St Augustine, Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations*. For Wittgenstein, Augustine's story of language acquisition encapsulates a certain compelling picture of the relationship between the mind, language, and reality, from which the traditional and perennial problems of philosophy emerge. This picture has several interrelated constituents with multiple ramifications, but at its centre lie three contentions. The first claim is that 'Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.'<sup>2</sup> The second is that understanding, in the sense of grasping the meaning of a word, consists of the mental association of a word with an object, its sense. Finally, a sentence is held to be a combination of these word-names, and its meaning, determined by the meaning of its constituents, is conceived as a possible description of the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 8. Quoted in (GEM Anscombe and R Rhees eds) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed, Oxford, Blackwell, 1978, paragraph 1.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive account of the ramifications of Augustine's picture of language for Wittgenstein's thought see Gordon P Baker and Peter MS Hacker, *Wittgenstein, Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*, vol 1, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980.

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<sup>4</sup> John Locke (JW Yolton ed and abridgement), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London and New York, Dent Dutton, 1976, III, ii, 2.

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<sup>5</sup> See the section entitled 'The Paralogisms of Pure Reason' in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1929, pp 329-383. For a comparison of Kant and Wittgenstein see Peter M S Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, Oxford, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p 205ff.

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<sup>6</sup> For the history of this mirroring metaphor and its grip on the analytical tradition in philosophy, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.

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<sup>7</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, Toronto and London, McGraw-Hill, 1966, p 66.

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Together, these contentions form an account of meaning and a metaphysics of experience traceable in both Cartesian dualism and its legacies: transcendental idealism and British empiricism. For Descartes, the existence of the world may be doubted, for my knowledge of the objective realm is indirect, but my inner representations are indubitable and form the foundation of knowledge. I cannot doubt that I think. For Locke, the existence of the world can only be inferred and 'words in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them . . . nor can anyone apply them as marks, immediately, to anything else but the idea that he himself hath.'<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein argues that this priority given to subjective experience which provides the foundations of knowledge, and the conception of meaning that it entails, leads to incoherence. This argument, which rests on the contention that sense is public and objective, will be examined in more detail in the final section of this article. Here, however, it is important to note that Kant, too, offers a refutation of Cartesianism along similar lines to Wittgenstein in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he argues that the subject of experience can have self-knowledge only if it inhabits an objective world.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, for Kant the empirical self thus construed failed to account for the fact that we deem ourselves originators of our actions, autonomous moral agents, not subject to the causal and determined scheme of nature, applying practical as opposed to theoretical reason in our daily lives. As a consequence, he posited the existence of the transcendental constituting ego, the thing-in-itself, from the point of view of which the knowing subject lies outside the categories of space and time, which are merely the forms of its sentient perception. This conclusion effectively overthrew that of the First Critique and reinstated a form of dualism which inspired the traditional problem of German philosophy through Hegel down to Marx, namely, how to reconcile spirit and nature. In Kant the subjective or first person case is taken, once again, to be a privileged realm for the investigation of the foundations of knowledge. The mind is conceived as somehow mirroring or picturing in its representations the outside world, which can only be inferred from them.<sup>6</sup>

It is remarkable the extent to which Augustine's conception of language is reiterated in the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, who is seen as the founder of structural linguistics. Saussure's sign, it will be recalled, is a 'two-sided *psychological* entity' (my emphasis) consisting of a sound-image (signifier) and a concept (signified):

*The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it 'material' it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.*<sup>7</sup>

The bond forged between any given signifier and signified to form a sign appears arbitrary when viewed against the paradigmatic totality of possible relationships between signifiers and signifieds. The unity of the sign is only comprehensible from the standpoint of language conceived synchronically, as a closed system, where its meaning is fixed in relation to the totality of other signs. It is the task of structural linguistics to represent perspicuously the inter-relationship of signs which form the language system, and thus to establish how the meaning of the individual sign is fixed.

I shall later suggest, following Wittgenstein, that such an account of language is an idealist one, on the grounds that it seeks to establish the boundaries of signification and sense only by hiving off considerations of intersubjective communication and the social context of understanding. However, it is Jacques Derrida who, on very different grounds, has been most influential in his criticism of Saussure. And it is the relationship between this post-structuralist critique and the structuralist account of language upon which it is founded that generates what I will term in this article, the paradox of modernist discourse.

As Gayatri Spivak notes in the introduction to *Of Grammatology*, Derrida's chief concern might be seen as the persistent interrogation of the function of the proper name and proper, in the sense of literal, meaning. For Derrida, the Saussurian sign is a veritable metaphysic founded upon the privileging of the subject of speech. We cannot escape the fact that language 'signifies', given this authority by the subject, but we can demonstrate that use of language can always only generate the illusion of a mastery of reality and the presence of the signified. Interestingly and indicatively, Derrida's critique of Saussure begins not from questioning the legitimacy of the assumption that an explanation of language and meaning can proceed by the radical 'bracketing' of subjects and contexts of utterance, but rather, as it were, from his not taking that assumption seriously enough. The fixity of the signifier and the signified in the sign within the mind of the subject would have appeared but a transient illusion if Saussure had taken seriously his own theory of language, in which meaning is constituted out of the differential relationship between signs. For Derrida the symptom of strain in Saussure's thought lies in his relegation of the written word to a signifier of the signifier, the spoken word. The relatively context-independent 'public' realm of the written word is precisely the domain in which sense cannot be determinately fixed. Signified meanings are always signifiers of other meanings and a word gains its meaning, conceived in this light as a 'momentary' fixity of sense, only in terms of what it is not. 'Writing' for Derrida becomes a metaphor for the fact that the spoken word is 'always already' caught up in a differential play of meanings. But if the spoken word is caught up in this play, so is the speaking subject whose representation of itself to itself, or self-consciousness, is also predicated on a fixity of sense, the sense 'I' have of 'myself'. From the perspective of 'writing' the subject itself only has

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p 69.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p 71.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp 6-10.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p 24.

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<sup>12</sup> This immediately raises the question of psychoanalytic theory, which itself embodies most forcefully the paradox of modernist discourse, as Perry Meisel has demonstrated in 'Freud's Reflexive Realism', *October* 28, Spring 1984, pp 43-59. While it does seem to me that the arena where the 'materiality' of the Saussurian signifier must be taken seriously is in the psychic life of the individual, it is far from clear that the psychic relation to the material signifier can provide a model for meaning in general. It might be argued that the psychological relation to the signifier is parasitic on a conception of the understanding of language in which meaning is relatively stable and context dependent in an objective realm.

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'momentary' fixity and is 'always already' absent: 'Spacing as writing is the becoming absent and the becoming unconscious of the subject . . . and the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or referent.'<sup>8</sup>

For Derrida, the privileging of the relation between word and meaning in the subject (phonocentrism) is intimately tied to the privileging of the subject of representation itself (logocentrism). Together they generate the illusion of epistemological certainty which lies at the core of the history of western metaphysics: 'All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or material, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive towards the reduction of the trace or "writing".'<sup>9</sup> Structuralism in this light becomes the successor subject to idealism, and Derrida subjects its philosophical heritage to the same 'immanent critique' as Saussure; a series of textual readings which seek to demonstrate the internal contradictions necessarily engendered by any doctrine that purports to describe the foundations of experience.

It would seem that Derrida himself might be criticised for attempting to describe such foundations in his conception of the trace or 'writing', and he certainly encourages this reading by suggesting the possibility and indeed the 'necessity' of a 'science of grammatology'.<sup>10</sup> However, his central claim is that we can only work within this tradition of 'foundational' philosophy, and in particular, we can only work within a language in which a fixity of position, even if illusory, is always necessary in order to speak. In this sense 'deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work'.<sup>11</sup> But this conception of 'deconstruction' and the position of knowledge it implies poses a persistent difficulty, the difficulty which I have referred to in this article as the paradox of modernist discourse, which is also perhaps the paradox of the modernist sensibility in general. The more resolutely the referent is assailed, the more it seems to affirm its unmistakable presence, albeit in its absence. It seems that we cannot escape the 'Augustinian picture' of meaning and experience despite its apparent incoherence, as if the failure of that picture to provide objectivity of sense and a guarantee of the referent threatens the loss of meaning entirely, without which we could not speak. It is as if the discourse of deconstruction affirms the necessity of that which it denies and returns to the very illusion that it seeks to expose, or so it would seem. It is as if the argument which seeks to deny the *Cartesian* self and the dualisms which flow from it, ends up by denying the very self upon which its own discourse depends.<sup>12</sup> It is this paradox which I wish to pursue in the discourse of the critical theory of Adorno and Baudrillard.

### Meaning and the Commodity Form: Adorno's Critical Theory

*Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to*

*realize it was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried. . . . Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realisation, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticise itself.*

– Theodor Adorno<sup>13</sup>

At one point in *Of Grammatology* Derrida refers to a person ‘who has begun the same work in another area of the same habitation’.<sup>14</sup> Would it be fanciful to suggest that he is referring to the writings of Theodor Adorno? If, as Adorno suggests in the above quotation, it is philosophy which must be criticised, criticism of philosophy, for Adorno, is criticism of what he terms identity thinking. In simple terms, identity thinking relates a concept to an object, a concept being that which a predicate refers to. For example, ‘the judgement that a man is free refers to the concept of freedom’<sup>15</sup>. The concept purports to be filled by the object ‘free-man’ (identity thinking), and in a trivial sense it is necessarily applicable to all men defined as free. However, for Adorno, ‘the concept says not only that it is applicable to all individuals defined as free: it feeds on the idea of a condition in which individuals would have qualities not to be ascribed to anyone here and now’<sup>16</sup>. In identity thinking, the concept projects a ‘utopian’ or ideal object to fulfil it (pure identity), while actually positing a relation between a concept and an independently verifiable object. Non-identity thinking, critical theory, exposes this gap between concept and object, revealing the pure identity implicit in any identity thinking. But Adorno claims that any form of thinking is identity thinking, although all identity thinking contains non-identity within it. Critical theory can thus proceed only by resolutely affirming identity in the hope of more radically exposing non-identity, and in the process it is constantly beset by the very illusion of identity which it seeks to expose.

But what does Adorno mean by claiming that all thinking is identity thinking thus construed? After all, the example of freedom is a highly contentious one, being at the very heart of the western tradition of metaphysics he seeks to expose. At the trivial level Adorno suggests that identity thinking refers to the fact that ‘every single object subsumed under a class has definitions not contained in the definition of the class’<sup>17</sup>. This is the traditional philosophical problem of ‘determinacy of sense’, posed within the ‘Augustinian picture’ of language, which philosophers in the analytical tradition have attempted to resolve by a variety of strategies. But this attempt to resolve the question by linguistic analysis only succeeds, for Adorno, by side-stepping the more fundamental questions raised by that set of discourses which claim to make significant truth claims about the relationship between man and nature, and man and the social formation. This discourse is problematic because it always involves an evaluative dimension, yet to abjure such a discourse entirely is to sink back into an empiricism whose unreflective certainties are purchased

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, New York, Continuum, 1973, p 3.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *op cit*, p 24.

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, *op cit*, p 150.

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p 150.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p 150.

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only at the price of its having nothing significant to say. As such, it is itself a form of identity thinking merely reaffirming the status quo.

This problem can also be fruitfully posed in relation to Foucault's formulation of the Kantian dilemma in *The Order of Things*. Foucault considers that with the introduction of the Kantian problem of man as both the object of knowledge and the source of knowledge, a rupture occurs between the classical and the modern paradigms of knowledge. In the classical paradigm of thought, man is on a par with objects in the natural world and language is a transparent medium for representing reality. With the advent of man as a source of knowledge this transparency is ruptured. If language pre-exists man, how can man be explained as a source of meaning, as the subject rather than the object of discourse or representation?

On the other hand, if man is the source of language and understanding, one who makes sense of the world, how can his position as a finite being in the world of objects be explained? The problem of accounting for man as both subject and object of knowledge forms what Foucault terms the problem of man as an empirico-transcendental doublet<sup>18</sup>, and the discourse about man constantly falls into the trap posed by this polarity. On the one hand, there is the type of discourse such as positivist sociology which makes significant truth claims about the relationship between man and society, but does not take account of its own grounds or origin within that society and hence tends to reaffirm the status quo. On the other hand, there is that transcendent mode of explanation which attempts to take seriously the context of its own production and origin and provide a ground for knowledge, but at the expense of making its truth claims highly subject to doubt and the impossibility of confirmation, such as the humanist and Hegelian approach to Marxism typified by Lukacs.

It is not my concern here to investigate Foucault's 'structuralist' solution to the dilemma in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* which has been persuasively criticised elsewhere as falling onto the idealist side of the dichotomy.<sup>19</sup> Rather, I would suggest that the same problem defines the terms of Adorno's critical theory. On the one hand, positivist social sciences reduce the concept to the object. For example, the so-called operational definition of freedom in which the proposition  $x$  is free from  $y$  to do  $z$  (where  $x$  is the agent,  $y$  is the constraint, and  $z$  is the action) forms a putatively testable hypothesis in the social realm. While such an approach attempts to account for the empirical subject, in reducing the concept of freedom to something immediately verifiable it surreptitiously validates the given form of social organisation. On the other hand, the totalising form of reflection provided by traditional Marxism, while holistic and critical, only distances the concept further from the object in the impossibility of its realisation. For Adorno, there is no way out of the dilemma posed by identity thinking, for any serious reflection on the social formation involves surreptitiously or overtly a 'pure identity', which is not, and seemingly cannot be, realised. And critical theory is not immune

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Bristol, Tavistock Publications, 1970, pp 318-322.

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<sup>19</sup> See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Beyond Hermeneutics*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982, ch 4.

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from this; in particular it can never pretend to evacuate the referent entirely, for it is a pre-condition of significant discourse.

Adorno's negative dialectic is formulated and elucidated in relation to Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value and the phenomenon of commodity fetishism or reification. A homology is suggested between the structure of concept formation and the structure of the exchange process in the economic sphere. We might remind ourselves again of Marx's formulation:

*The mysterious character of the commodity form consists, therefore, simply in that fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.*<sup>20</sup>

For Adorno, the crucial sense of this passage resides in the fact that the plurality and diversity of individual activity, through the mechanism of equivalent abstract labour, is reduced to a commensurability between objects in exchange. Thus non-equivalent activities generating different use values are posited as identical. The homology between identification and reification entails the apparent impossibility of returning to a non-reified existence, of recovering an essence, use value, from its form of appearance, exchange. Reification is not a fact of consciousness for Adorno, but an objective feature of the social realm. To believe that it can be undermined by class consciousness is an illusion, not merely because as a matter of fact class consciousness has failed to take root, but that implied in the historicist conception of reification itself is the illusory possibility of its own transcendence; it presupposes the reconciliation of subject and object and a return to use value. In this sense Adorno's stricture against Hegel, 'to equate the negation of the negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form'<sup>21</sup>, is as much a stricture against historicist Marxism:

*The thinker may easily comfort himself imagining that in the dissolution of reification, of the merchandise character, he possesses the philosopher's stone. But reification itself is the reflexive form of false objectivity; centering theory around reification, a form of consciousness, makes critical theory idealistically acceptable to the reigning consciousness. . . .*<sup>22</sup>

Non-identity cannot be asserted by postulating use value or a realm of inalienable human need against reification, for that non-identity is itself a product of identity:

*Essence can no longer be hypostasised as the pure, spiritual being in itself. Rather essence passes into that which lies beneath the facade of immediacy, of the supposed facts and which makes the facts what they are. . . . such essence to begin with is the fatal mischief of a world so arranged as to degrade men to*

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, I, New York, Random House, 1977, pp 164-165.

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<sup>21</sup> Theodor Adorno, p 158.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p 190.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p 167.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p 148.

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<sup>25</sup> Clearly there is much more to be said here. Both Derrida's and Adorno's encounter with the tradition of western metaphysics is mediated by the thought of Nietzsche and involves a 'deconstruction' of Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger's existentialism. For an introduction to Adorno's place in this tradition see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, New York and London, Macmillan, 1978, esp chs 2 and 4. On Derrida's place see Gayatri Spivak's introduction to *Of Grammatology*, op cit. For further comparison of Adorno and Derrida see Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp 73-81.

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<sup>26</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, London, Athlone Press, 1981, pp 37-96. Arguably, Derrida's attitude shifts in the '70s from unsympathetically placing Marx in the metaphysical tradition, to a recognition of the deconstructive edge in Marx's writings. See Michael Ryan, op cit, pp 43-46.

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<sup>27</sup> Theodor Adorno, op cit, p 228.

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*means of their sese conservare, a world that contains and threatens their life by reproducing it and making them believe that it has this character so as to satisfy their needs.*<sup>23</sup>

The system of exchange, the commodity form, is sustained precisely because of the illusion of content, the illusion that needs are fulfilled and that objects have a use value. One is tempted to say that the object is 'constructed', but it is real enough, it is the 'fatal mischief' upon which the system functions. In this sense Adorno is radically anti-humanist and anti-historicist. Pure identity which does not merely reveal non-identity – the real fulfilment of the concept in the object, use value as a property of the object – is a utopian ideal. There is apparently no possibility of a return to human essence and human needs for they themselves are functionally related to the commodity system and serve to sustain it. Ideology is not a form of false consciousness mediated by one's class position, because it is not a content of consciousness at all. Rather, it is the principle of equivalence itself which dominates the social realm. 'Identity', Adorno asserts, 'is the primal form of ideology.'<sup>24</sup> To be sure, ideology contains within itself the possibility of its own critique, non-identity thinking, but it cannot be transcended, only revealed in its ceaseless operation.

In the form of the negative dialectic, Adorno's philosophy closely parallels Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition of western philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that Adorno carries out the very deconstruction of the Marxist tradition that Derrida has called for.<sup>26</sup> Adorno's writings constantly seek to demonstrate the fact that any philosophy grounded on the attempt to discover epistemological foundations, including historicist Marxism itself, is destined to fall into internal contradiction. Yet, like Derrida, Adorno insists that we can only remain within the structures of thought imposed by it. However, Adorno does cling to a conception of freedom, the notion of an autonomous subject able to reflect on discourse and the social formation, even if constantly threatened by reification and identity.

In the context of a critique of the Kantian moral will, in which freedom is seen as conformity to the dictates of moral reason, Adorno introduces the concept of the addendum. For Adorno, Kant's moral subject is unable to bridge the gap between consciousness and action. However, Adorno perceives a moment in the decision to act which does bridge this gap, a 'phantasm' of reconciliation between mind and nature: 'The addendum has an aspect which under rationalistic rules is irrational. . . . The addendum is an impulse, the rudiment of a phase in which the dualism of extramental and intramental was not thoroughly consolidated yet, neither violently bridgeable nor an ontological ultimate.'<sup>27</sup> In Kant the will is reduced to a mental abstraction, but the dualism thus constituted between the willing subject and its effective action in the world is founded upon the presence of an absence, the 'addendum', without which 'there would be no real will at all.' Adorno continues, 'It is a flash of light

between the poles of something long past, something grown all but unreconcilable, and that which might someday come to be.'<sup>28</sup>

The addendum has a remarkable structural affinity with the Derridean supplement, that which is both 'added on', a surplus, 'the fullest measure of presence', and that which 'takes the place of', filling, but filling a void.<sup>29</sup> The negative dialectician and the deconstructionist is he who traces the supplement. However, for Adorno the tracing of this movement, the non-identity in identity, is a vestigial recovery of presence and truth; the 'rudiment of a phase' of reconciliation. The 'Augustinian picture' which seems to form a philosophical horizon in Derrida's work becomes, in the light of Adorno's Marxism, an historical horizon as well. The romanticism of this conception manifests Adorno's attraction to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of language, of an erstwhile prelapsarian mimetic unity between word and thing, albeit stripped of its theological rationale.<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer wrote in *The Eclipse of Reason* that, 'Philosophy is the conscious effort to knit our knowledge and insight into a linguistic structure in which all things are called by their right names.' Furthermore, that truth in genuine philosophy is 'the adequation of name and things'<sup>31</sup>. But for Adorno (and Horkheimer), such a pure philosophy was impossible in a world committed to reification and false reconciliation, for it could only reproduce the false identity of that which it seeks to understand. Like Derrida, Adorno cannot see a way out of the metaphysics of identity, only intimate its fall. But Adorno's critical stance can only be understood in the light of an historical thesis; the spread of reification over the entire social realm, elaborated in his critique of the culture industry.

Adorno's retreat into the negative dialectic was engendered by his interpretation of the transformation of the relationship between economy and culture in the twentieth century. For Adorno, the free market ideology of the nineteenth century, which allowed the cultural sphere a relative autonomy from the forces of production, has given way in the twentieth century to a domination of the form of exchange in all realms of social existence. Culture, which existed to give meaning to and make sense of life, albeit in a reified form detached from social existence, has become so entirely permeated by the commodity form that in a reciprocal movement, meaning and reification have become mutually interpenetrating in the systematic generation of illusion. Technological media of reproduction are privileged in his analysis precisely because they erase technique and intentionality in cultural production, in which the last vestiges of an autonomous constitutive subjectivity could be traced. Conversely, the productive role of the imagination is effaced in the power of technology to reproduce the real in a transparent process of signification. Film and television appropriate the real, unfulfilled desires of the subject and provide them with an illusory but realised fulfilment in a substitute reality which is thoroughly permeated by the logic of the commodity form. Film narratives are characterised at once by endless repetition (formula, genre, etc)

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p 229.

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, *op cit.*, pp 144-145.

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<sup>30</sup> See Martin Jay, *Adorno*, London, Fontana, 1984, p 76. For Walter Benjamin's philosophy of language see 'On the Mimetic Faculty' and 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' in *Reflections*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp 314-336, and 'Doctrine of the Similar', *New German Critique* 17, Spring 1979, pp 65-69.

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<sup>31</sup> Both quotations from Horkheimer are cited in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, London, Heinemann, 1973, p 262.

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<sup>32</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, London, New Left Books, 1981, p 90.

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<sup>33</sup> For an excellent analysis of the origins of Adorno's view of the avant-garde and its relation to his dichotomy between modernism and the culture industry see Andreas Huyssen, 'Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner', *New German Critique* 29, Spring/Summer 1983, pp 8-38.

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<sup>34</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146, July/August 1984, p 57.

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in which a flattening totality represses difference and value, and by calculated effect (fetishised technique, star persona, musical leitmotifs, etc) which, like advertisements, brazenly seduce the consumer into surrendering autonomy. In short, for Adorno, the culture industry generates the 'absolute reality of the unreal'<sup>32</sup>.

Modernist art, represented archetypally in Beckett's plays and Schönberg's music, as the 'repressed other' of the culture industry, can be seen as the last refuge of autonomy. In its radical detachment from representation and social intervention, it expresses negatively and in purely formal terms, the radical usurpation of all aspects of social life by the commodity form. It remains as a symbol and a testament to the failure of the historical avant-gardes to bridge the rupture between autonomous art and society.<sup>33</sup> It offers a correlative in the sphere of culture to the negative dialectic of the critical theorist, generated by the failure of Marxist theory to transform itself into practice. Adorno's high modernism, like his critical discourse, can only paradoxically affirm what it seeks to deny in an endless exposé of suffering. The paradox of modernist discourse has infused Adorno's social philosophy to the extent that practice itself can only become a demonstration of the impossibility of grasping the referent, a demonstration which by its nature can only more forcefully affirm the power of the referent. This paradox, to my mind, reaches its apotheosis in the work of Baudrillard and the culture of the simulacrum.

### The Culture of the Simulacrum: Baudrillard's Social Philosophy

*Insofar as the theorist wins . . . by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself.*

— Fredric Jameson<sup>34</sup>

Baudrillard's social philosophy, like Adorno's, focuses on Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value and the theory of reification. However, rather than interpreting reification in the light of a critique of the relation between concept and object, he interprets it in the light of a critique of structural linguistics. Furthermore, rather than endorsing Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism by interpretation, he offers a critique of Marx. Baudrillard suggests that despite the fact that Marx defines the commodity as having a two-fold nature, use value and exchange value, commodity fetishism is not a function of the commodity thus defined, but a function of exchange value alone. Use value, correlative to human needs, lies outside the sphere of reification in Marx, to be reappropriated once the system of commodity exchange has been overthrown. For Baudrillard, such a position is naively idealist, a 'veritable

rationalist mystique'<sup>35</sup>, when viewed from the perspective of late capitalism in which needs and their correlative use values are produced by the system itself. Indeed, Baudrillard contends that needs function as 'a productive force required by the functioning of the system itself, by its process of reproduction and survival. In other words there are only needs because the system needs them.'<sup>36</sup> Marx, in hypostasising an autonomous realm of need thus appears as an ideologue of the system. In the *Mirror of Production* Baudrillard seeks to demonstrate that Marx's privileging of the realm of production in the dialectic of freedom, whereby history is a process of mastery over nature, not only betrays an ethnocentric bias, but pretends a universality when actually it gains plausibility only as a critique of nineteenth century capitalism. The extension of the exchange process across the entire area of a previously autonomous cultural and 'private' realm, where life could have meaning beyond the system of exchange, requires a radically new conception of the logic of the social formation. Baudrillard names this logic the 'political economy of the sign'.

This economy is characterised by the homology established between the relationship of use value and exchange value in the social sphere, and the relationship of the signifier to the signified in language. Needs, for Baudrillard, rather than being predicates of a subject, are a function of the 'system of objects' which parcels out and contains the desire of the subject in advance, in a general system of equivalence. But although it is a function of the system of exchange, the concept of need and its correlative, use value, serve to guarantee it by purporting to refer to the real needs of the subject and the real worth of the object. Just as use value is hypostasised as the privileged content/object in the relation of use value to exchange value while in fact they are functionally dependent, so an equivalent hypostatisation has occurred in the realm of signification. Baudrillard, following the Derridean critique of Saussure, argues that the relationship between the signifier and signified in linguistics, although posited on a divide, 'fixes' the field of meaning; the signified anchors the signifier as an ideally unambiguous referent, just as exchange value is anchored in use value. Use value, for Baudrillard, is an illusory anchor, in the sense that it is merely a function of the form of exchange which produces a coincidence of object and need while masquerading as fulfilling the real desires of the subject. Similarly, the signified cannot be identified as a 'content' independently of the signifier, to which the signifier refers. Although, of course, the system of signification sustains itself on the principle that it can be so identified. Each field provides itself with a 'referential rationale', an 'alibi', upon which its functioning depends.<sup>37</sup> The effect of this formal identity between the sphere of signification and the sphere of exchange is to radically displace the notion of ideology as false consciousness, for ideology is in fact 'the very form which traverses both the production of signs and material production.'<sup>38</sup> Ideology 'seizes all production, material or symbolic, in the same process of abstraction,

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<sup>35</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St Louis, Telos Press, 1981, p 134.

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p 82.

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p 153.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p 144.

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p 146.

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983, p 11.

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p 146.

reduction, general equivalence and exploitation'<sup>39</sup>.

It is not hard to perceive the close affinities between the critical theory of Adorno and Baudrillard. Adorno's homology between the process of concept formation (identity thinking) and the sphere of economic production (the commodity form) is reproduced by Baudrillard in terms of the homology between signification and the commodity form. Ideology is, for Adorno, the principle of identity, just as it is, for Baudrillard, the code of equivalence. Adorno's 'fatal mischief', the 'pure identity' within identity thinking which posits the fulfilment of the concept in the object, of use value in exchange, parallels Baudrillard's contention that the fulfilment of needs in the use value of an object is the 'alibi' which enables the system to function. For both Adorno and Baudrillard, the conceptualisation of ideology in these terms cuts across the distinction between base and superstructure in such a way that reification cannot be overcome by a transformation in the realm of production. Baudrillard, as we have seen, situates himself differently from Adorno in relation to Marx, but in a sense the difference in perspective merely covers the well-worn terrain of debate over the relationship of the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* to the Marx of *Capital*. To put it reductively, Adorno contends that *Capital* supersedes the humanism of the early Marx, while Baudrillard contends that residues of the early Marx remain. However, in rejecting even Adorno's critical Marxist standpoint, the 'otherness' of modernist art and the possibility of 'immanent criticism', Baudrillard drives the paradox of modernist discourse to its ultimate conclusion – the absolute absence of the referent and its absolute presence at one and the same time.

For Baudrillard, like Adorno, the privileged domain of analysis is the 'culture industry' which has extended across the entire social formation. But now it is no longer possible to speak of the *illusion* of the absolute reality of the unreal, because the distinction between reality and illusion is precisely what the 'political economy of the sign' denies. There is no Archimedian point, even if arbitrary, from which to make evaluative distinctions, even if those distinctions are made only, ultimately, to collapse into one another. One might well ask how Baudrillard can speak at all. How can he purport to tell us what *really* is the case?

In Baudrillard's view, the television image is the paradigm form of signification, a transparent sign offering direct access to its signified reality. Yet the reality that it purports to signify is entirely a function of the iconic form of its sign: 'the image . . . bears no relation to reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.'<sup>40</sup> At one and the same time that the relation to the real is denied, the iconic image is parasitic on the real, in such a way that 'the very definition of the real becomes that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. . . . At the limit of this process the real is not only what can be produced, but that which is always already reproduced, the hyperreal.'<sup>41</sup> The more that reference is denied the more forcefully it is re-instated; the real is more true than true, more real than real. Television becomes 'a sort of genetic code which controls the muta-

tion of the real into the hyper-real'<sup>42</sup>. Everyone glued to their television sets (Baudrillard is very fond of these tactile metaphors connoting, as they do, inter-penetration and absorption), is like the Louds family whose 'typical' life, filmed in a long running documentary series by a US television network, became indissolubly linked with its own reproduction; the programme ended with the divorce of the parents.

The metaphor of the genetic code, and more generally, metaphors involving the hypothetical entities of micro-science are crucial to Baudrillard. For science itself, as the privileged domain of the discourse of truth and correspondence to the world, is forced to 'invent' the entities which justify its own discourse in a process which, for Baudrillard, is formal and circular. Referring to the social domain in terms of these metaphors thus enables Baudrillard to 'describe' that which has no reference. We are, for example, informed that 'the social void is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline clusters which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro'<sup>43</sup>. In fact, it is less the absence of reference in such a description, than something whose reference is at once generated and denied by the very discourse that describes it. For the entities of subatomic physics only 'exist' as an unstable matrix of differential relations identified by the explanatory framework. Society, to use a Baudrillardian metaphor, is like a gigantic atom which 'exists' only as a function of its constituent individuals which 'exist' only as a function of their constantly shifting differential relations of attraction determined by the form of the whole of which they are parts. The key to the relationship between the social form and the contentless bodies of which it is composed is provided by the form of the television medium, which acts as the 'macroscopic extension' in the social realm of the collapsing of reference at the level of the sign.<sup>44</sup> The subject in front of the tele-screen finally *really* is the extensionless point of traditional solipsism, bound up in a state of planar drift and autistic fascination within the endless play of the image/signifier in an endless present.

Baudrillard's universe, endlessly circular and endlessly flat (the Möbius strip), is, in effect, a Derridean conception of meaning writ large over the entire social formation. In the cultural logic of simulation, the thinking, acting, historical subject and with it all meaningful distinctions between use value and exchange value, sex and work, subject and object, etc, are seen to collapse: 'All the referentials intermingle their discourse in a circular Möbian compulsion.'<sup>45</sup> But as Meaghan Morris forcefully suggests, the clarity that emerges within this logic is not the death of meaning, but rather, the extraordinary conception of a meaning whose death could be announced; that of a stable correspondence between word and object, language and the world.<sup>46</sup> Because, Baudrillard suggests, the term mass has no 'reference' or 'sociological reality', it has no meaning. This is rather like saying that because the boundaries of a country are historically changing and range over uncharted terrain, the country does not exist. Indeed, Baudrillard opens his essay 'The Precses-

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p 55.

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<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . Or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, New York, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983, p 3.

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p 100.

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<sup>45</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, *op cit*, p 35.

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<sup>46</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Room 101, or a Few Worst Things in the World', in André Frankovits (ed), *Seduced and Abandoned, The Baudrillard Scene*, Glebe, Stonemoss Services, 1984, pp 91-117, esp pp 99-103. My understanding of Baudrillard's recent work is indebted to this excellent article.

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, op cit, p 3.

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p 4.

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p 12.

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<sup>50</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op cit, p 155.

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<sup>51</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 19.

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<sup>52</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Room 101 . . .', op cit, pp 113 and 114.

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sion of Simulacra' with a discussion of the relationship between maps and the territory they describe, a 'representational imaginary, which both culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of an ideal co-extensivity between the map and the territory'<sup>47</sup>. It is a mad project because the territory only exists in the drawing of the map, and hence the territory cannot be identified independently of the map. Thus co-extensivity, the project of the cartographer, cannot be achieved because the difference between map and territory upon which it depends is illusory. When the real is merely engendered by the sign (the map) we 'enter the era' of simulation, 'the liquidation of all referentials', nay 'worse: . . . their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning'<sup>48</sup>. Baudrillard accuses those who live in this era 'when the real is no longer what it used to be'<sup>49</sup> of a nostalgia for referential certitude. But what is remarkable is the way that such a nostalgia subtends and generates Baudrillard's entire discourse. As if 'proper meaning' was 'inductile', unable to withstand deformation without fracture. Because the link between the signifier and the signified (the map and the territory) cannot be guaranteed, one cannot 'step outside' the signifier to the referent and hook up language to the world, he concludes that reference is merely a metaphysical illusion: 'The referent does not constitute an autonomous concrete reality at all; it is only the extrapolation of the excision established by the logic of the sign onto the world of things (the phenomenological universe of perception)'.<sup>50</sup> The final parenthesis points to the extraordinary philosophical naivety of Baudrillard's position. If the world of things is already merely 'the phenomenological universe of perception', the dice are, as it were, already loaded; we are set up, we are trapped, oscillating in interstitial orbit between the poles of empiricism and idealism generated by the 'Augustinian picture' of meaning, in a circular simulation model of discourse.

### Beyond the Paradox of Modernist Discourse

*To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.*

– Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>51</sup>

Baudrillard's social philosophy is not only philosophically naive, but 'critically' bankrupt. In its recent form, it is, as Morris suggests, 'More descriptive than description: hype.' It is a theoretical discourse which 'at long last responds to those claims of advertising, fashion and frenzied consumption that it hitherto surveyed from afar.'<sup>52</sup> It inflates the mundane and the platitudinous into significance, and degrades the values and discriminations upon which critical discourse depends. After all, it declares, the truth has been discovered, everything is meaningless. But as I have tried to demonstrate, it is generated by a paradox centring on the problem of the referent which runs throughout critical discourse. This

paradox is the desire for a 'foundational' discourse and for determinacy of sense in the correspondence of language with the world, on the one hand, and the recognition of the impossibility of such a discourse on the other. The recognition of this impossibility in Derridean radical epistemological scepticism is historicised in Adorno into a lament for a lost utopia. The only alternative for critical theory and practice are the resolute exposure of the illusory referential status of discourse (both word and image), and the affirmation of a radically non-representational cultural practice. Baudrillard, it would seem, marks the final cul-de-sac in which critical theory can no longer be 'critical' at all. It merely reproduces the world which is itself a reproduction, and any manifestation of 'radicalism' is always already absorbed in what it seeks to change.

Rethinking critical theory in a way that transcends this paradox should begin by questioning the theory of meaning and foundational thought which it negotiates. We suggested earlier that Wittgenstein rejects the 'Augustinian picture' on the basis of the Kantian reason that sense is objective. However, his form of argument is very different from Derrida's and he arrives at a conclusion which fundamentally questions Derrida's strategy and the forms of critical theory which pursue a similar line of thought. Wittgenstein's argument against the 'Augustinian picture', the famous private language argument, is complex and proceeds by *reductio ad absurdum*. Simply put, it is as follows. Suppose this theory of meaning were true, that words named objects which were their meaning and understanding the meaning of a word was a private mental act. Then I would not be able to refer to my own sensations by means of words intelligible in a public sphere, for, *ex hypothesi*, that sphere is open to doubt. I can only have certain knowledge of my own sensations. So I try to construct a concept S by means of associating the word 'S' with the occurrence of the sensation S. I cannot give an ordinary (public) definition of the word, but perhaps I can impress it upon myself that the correlation obtains. But this is insufficient because I must be able to pick out the sensation S at future times and this process does not provide a criterion of correctness for future applications of 'S' to S. There is no way of telling whether we seem to be right or whether we are right, hence we can no longer speak of 'being right' at all.<sup>53</sup> To use a language requires following rules and to follow rules presupposes the possibility of justifying applications of the rule, and to justify the application of the rule there must be a criterion of correctness for what constitutes following the rule. Such a criterion can only be provided in the 'public' domain. The first person ascription of psychological predicates (e.g., I am in pain), presupposes the third person ascription of psychological predicates (e.g., he is in pain) in an objective realm.

For Wittgenstein, objectivity of sense means that language is a social activity, embedded in a set of common social practices. One can only understand what the word pain means by using it to describe others' pain and our own in a given context. But the fact that we can be wrong in our

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<sup>53</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, paragraph 258.

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

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description of others' pain does not throw us headlong into doubt, for being wrong in any particular case presupposes a general certainty in the practice of using the word. This argument is of profound importance, for it implies that truth or 'being right' is dependent on the common practices and shared dispositions of a linguistic community. Wittgenstein's conception of the relationship between language and reality has often been compared to Thomas Kuhn's conception of the practice of 'normal' science: the tacit acceptance of a shared conceptual scheme embedded in a set of normative institutional practices.<sup>54</sup> The discourse of truth, accuracy and conformity to the world claimed by normal science is not a result of an absolute knowledge of reality, but rather a reflection of that discourse's status as 'normal' science. But what is the relevance of this to critical theory?

Within the historical perspective given by a contextual notion of meaning and truth, certain constraints become evident as to what critical theory can and cannot say. In particular, no theory can be at once a part of 'normal science' arising in a determinate historical context, yet ground its truth claims on meta-theoretical and trans-historical assumptions with a timeless validity. Of course, critical theory is not a 'normal' discourse. It is akin to Kuhn's marginal, 'abnormal' science which challenges the truth-claims of 'normal' science and may eventually supersede it; a process which will involve a transformation in previous modes of institutional practice and self-understanding. But it brings to bear its criticism in the realm of social life and the discourses about social life, offering a theoretical standpoint from which contemporary society, viewed externally, lacks the moral, historical and discursive coherence which it ascribes to itself from within. The point is, though, that the same constraints apply to both 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse. The critical purchase of critical theory is that it reveals a disparity between 'traditional' theory and the reality it purports to describe and offers an alternative description of reality from an alternative theoretical perspective. But it cannot offer the revised conception of reality on the basis of stepping outside historical context from some transcendent position. Rather it offers a new conception of reality as another, potential, 'normal' discourse, which it will become only if and when it commands widespread assent.

To my mind the theories of Adorno and Baudrillard go wrong precisely when historically contingent features of the social realm, increasing reification and the commodification of culture, are interpreted in the light of a trans-historical, trans-contextual conception of meaning. Of course, it is a transcendent conception of meaning which denies the possibility of the correspondence of language and reality and affirms a radical epistemological scepticism. However, it is nonetheless transcendent, because it imposes on the social sphere it interprets, an apparently timeless necessity; the supposedly necessary impossibility of knowing reality (use value, needs, etc) is confirmed by the contingent facts of the contemporary social formation, and vice versa. Epistemological scepticism turns

out, after all, to be the other side of the 'realist' or 'objectivist' coin.

It may still be argued that this paradoxical position is the essential standpoint of critical theory, not only as a descriptive and historical reality but also as something to be valued; that its *theoretical position is theoretically coherent* precisely insofar as it takes on a transcendent viewpoint, and that only such a transcendent standpoint allows it to take the permanently critical position which characterises, for example, Adorno's negative dialectic. From this position, the incoherence I have accused it of would appear as a criticism only from the point of view of 'traditional' theory. It seems to me that such a contention is unsupportable on both counts.

Kuhn argues that although there is no way of proving one scientific paradigm against another, there are certain regulative principles which are brought to bear at moments of crisis which make it reasonable to adopt one paradigm in preference to another, including basic standards of internal consistency.<sup>55</sup> If such standards themselves are refused then rational discourse and persuasion break down entirely. Perhaps more crucially still, the transcendent standpoint of critical theory robs it of its critical edge; its ability to effect change. If critical theory descends from its Olympian heights to become just another potential 'normal' discourse it not only gains in coherence, it also gains in political relevance. We can accept the demise of traditional 'historicist' Marxism and the domination of the exchange process over the social and cultural spheres. We can even accept the brute reality of some aspects of the so-called 'postmodern' condition. But we need not espouse a discourse of despair and resignation in the face of a crippling reality, or succumb to the lures of what we purport to describe. For if meaning is not transcendent of the lived experience of groups and individuals, neither is the meaningfulness of cultural artifacts, their social significance and their context of understanding.

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, pp 198-204.

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DITCH YOUR DOGMA

# IMAGES OF LANGUAGE AND INDISCREET DIALOGUE: 'THE MAN WHO ENVIED WOMEN'

BY PATRICIA MELLENCAMP

IN *Morel's Invention* Adolfo Casares tells the tale of an escaped convict who found refuge on an island with only a single building, 'the museum'. One day the convict (soon to be a film theorist) saw people strolling and talking. After voyeuristically watching them, he noticed that these beautiful people repeating actions and conversations were complex projections, machine-made images and sounds. For this eternity as illusions in space and time, they paid with their lives. By falling in love with one of the imaginary women, the hapless convict again imprisoned himself; he renounced his life in order to become her lover, an image, gradually dying, day by day.

Casares' tale details an apparatus of power, driven by male desire, predicated on vision – love at first sight ensnaring both actant and audience in the circuitry of paradoxical pleasure – sight as initiatory, desire as motivating, and belief as deathly, imaginary action. Seeing is deceiving, risky yet desirous believing for this male impelled scenario. On Casares' terms, this tale is a cultural fable, a perfect metaphor of cinema; I can see sweet and luminous analogies with most contemporary theories, for example, Jacques Lacan's male subject's overweening desire; Michel Foucault's

panopticon and 'seeing machine'; or Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal in which 'The space of simulation confuses the real with the model'. Casares' story, intact and unquestioned, is, like the Oedipus scenario, dependent upon the familiar representation of woman as the luring temptress, the imaginary signifier inadvertently ensnaring hapless victims, albeit criminal ones, in narrative, love, marriage or modernism.

The parable begs to be rewritten. Thus, I wonder how the beautiful woman felt when she saw the escaped convict, with ragged beard, filthy clothes, and feverish, staring eyes pursue her, emerge from his powerful invisibility, enter her world and her bedroom. Did she also fall in love with him – or did Peeping Tom's desperate visage terrify her? Did he rape her, as he had obsessed over her image? Or did he woo her? And, did it matter? As ideal, she and we are imagined to be eternally grateful for a 'real' man, no matter what his character or countenance, who surrenders to his desire for us – the penultimate martyrdom for males – and, outside subjectivity, without reciprocity of desire, to allow this tattered, dangerous fellow/felon to rule our stories and sometimes our lives.

However, when the 'projected' woman either returns or deflects the aggressive gaze, claims her voice, controlling enunciation and address, and takes pleasure/knowledge and action with other women, on screen, in the audience, and in life, other scenarios result. *The Man Who Envied Women*, the acclaimed, 1985 film by Yvonne Rainer, is an extraordinary, bold move toward a very new scenario – women's subjectivity. In an unschematic manner, I will thresh out several of the issues which resonate or unravel in this labyrinth, specifically the debates which address theory – its now generic catchphrases rendering it tedious and apolitical in many versions – and arguments which touch, often indirectly or inadvertently, on feminist practices.

As Teresa de Lauretis wrote with more than a touch of irony in her extraordinary book, *Alice Doesn't*: 'The real task is to enact the contradiction of female desire, and of women as social subjects, in the terms of narrative.'<sup>1</sup> As if on mutual cue, Yvonne Rainer – speaking at the same Milwaukee Film Theory Conference in 1981, presenting her early script of this film's narrative dilemma – said that as her work was becoming 'explicitly' feminist (an 'evolution' from covert to overt operations), it was more closely aligned with narrative:

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p 156.

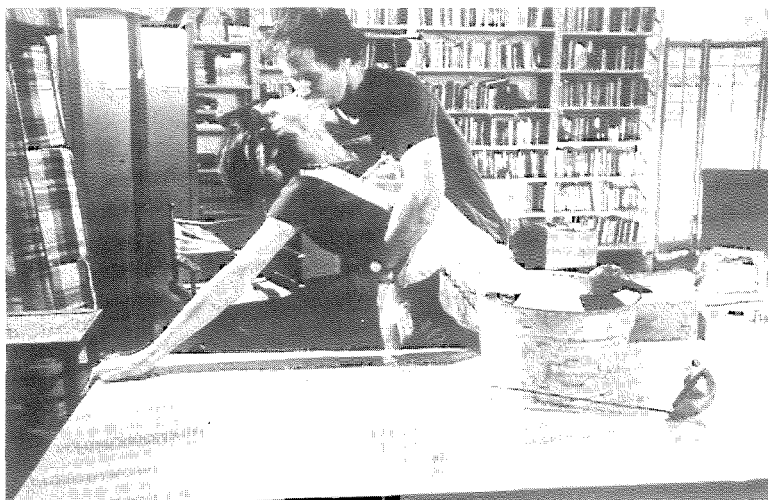
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<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Rainer, 'More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/Backwater', *Wide Angle* vol 7 nos 1 and 2, p 8. This is merely a sketch of the film-working thoughts and scenes as a dialogue with an imagined audience response.

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*From descriptions of individual feminine experience floating free of both social context and narrative hierarchy . . . to explicitly feminist speculations about feminine experience . . . an evolution which is becoming more explicitly feminist seems to demand a more solid anchoring in narrative conventions.*<sup>2</sup>

With only the slightest of narratives – yet such a recognisable and important one for women that we fill in with our collective experiences, truly sharing the process of the film, Rainer does enact de Lauretis' 'real task' – the contradiction of women as social subjects – and re-enacts



*The Man Who Envied Women*: Yvonne Rainer enacts the double bind of desire.

(through the mouthpiece, Jack Deller) the double bind of women's desire, seduced and abandoned by modern theory.

*The Man Who Envied Women* is an idiosyncratic thesaurus of contemporary theory and personal response to daily life, art and feminism, an artist's history of sexuality and politics. 'This film is about the housing shortage, changing family patterns, the poor pitted against the middle class, Hispanics against Jews, artists and politics, female menopause, abortion rights. There's even a dream sequence.'<sup>3</sup> I will only sketch its critique of masculinity – particularly the linkage of theory with men, or better, power – a critique defined by feminism.

Rainer lambasts 'theories of the subject' constructed by vision and imagined as the purvey of a masterful male subject over a subordinate, passive female object. This critique of vision's parameters revitalises feminist 'deconstruction' of conventions of the gaze in narrative by inaugurating an investigation of that invaluable project's missing term – male representation or the means by which men represent themselves. (While volumes have been written about male subjectivity, little has been written about the male body; the reverse is true for woman whose body has remained the constant focus of analyses with little work on female subjectivity.) Two antagonists of *The Man Who Envied Women* are the unlikely but promising duo, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan.

Foucault conceptualises the relation between discourse, power and sexuality, articulating the collaboration between power and the gaze, by portraying language as a set of effects which can be seen. Thus, his theme of an ever-present Gaze which regulates all images is essential to an understanding of networks of power: '... the operation of a relational power that sustains itself by its own mechanism and which, for the spectacle of public events, substitutes the uninterrupted play of calculated gazes.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Rainer, op cit, p 11.

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p 177.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* Foucault, the historian of marginal cultures, is also of value to this film which examines traces of the erased, the socially removed, an operation covered up by official language.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, New York, Vintage Books, 1975, pp 114-115. This speaking eye is frequently operative in women's melodrama, particularly medical discourse. See Mary Ann Doane, 'The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the "Women's Film" of the 1940s', in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed), *The Female Body in Western Culture*, Harvard University Press, 1986, pp 152-174.

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<sup>7</sup> See 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction' by Mary Ann Doane, Linda Williams and Patricia Mellencamp, in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Maryland, University Publications of America, 1984, pp 1-17.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, New York, Norton, 1978, p 106.

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Surveillance has replaced the spectacle of the public body. This uninterrupted play of calculated gazes involves a 'hold over the body . . . a power that seems all the less corporal in that it is more subtly physical.' In this construction, TV and film are subtly physical as well – 'according to a whole play of space, lines, screens, beams, degrees'<sup>5</sup>.

Foucault's emphasis on vision, a 'pure Gaze' with 'pure Language' – a 'speaking eye' – is a metaphor made literal in his use of Jeremy Bentham's penitentiary design of the panopticon.<sup>6</sup> Like the Freudian scenario, the dissociation of the see/being seen, public/private, word/image dyad can operate over the female body; woman, like Casares' illusory projection, is caught in a permanent visibility, her identity created through her being for another.<sup>7</sup> Rainer has inverted the usual poles of this panoptic dyad, capturing Jack Deller, an unappealing 'speaking eye', in revelatory visibility with only an initial, fleeting glimpse of the female protagonist.

Lacan writes in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: 'What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter life and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects.'<sup>8</sup> Rainer has postmodernised the rendering of this modernist, masculine scene. Jack Deller, held within a public visibility of the gaze of the camera and the spectator (rather than safe in the privacy of Lacan's imaginary mirror involving the confirmation of male identity by mother/other) is not only determined but undone, receiving satiric effects of this encounter.

Deller (Tell Her) is the unflappable, US embodiment of continental theory, a transcultural mutant. This literal, divided, speaking subject, a parody of both Lacan's other/Other and Foucault's 'speaking eye', gradually makes a fool of himself. In convoluted dialogue with himself, he is language made visible – comically and frighteningly familiar to the women in the audience, the voice-off protagonist, Trisha Brown, and Rainer. Jack is confined within his barren politics of theory rather than life. Like Lacan, he is a real 'ladies' man' wearing the verbal garb of Foucault, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Stultifying and oblivious, he is the droning voice of theory as unrelenting patriarchy.

Jack, the analysand in film analysis, also postures as Lacan the analyst, another 'man who envied women'. During one session, pathetic Jack, claiming validity by fidelity to a lengthy marriage with a now dead wife, says 'I knew so little about women then. I almost know too much now.' (Women in the audience erupt with laughter on this line.) At least for Freud, woman was a problem and for Lacan was *the* question to which there was no answer. All-knowing Jack reiterates the contemporary spectre of the sensitive, caring man as the reluctant, adoring lover of many women – the modernist credo parodied by comparison to the several Humphrey Bogart clips and critiques by Rainer and Martha Rosler in analyses of the journalism pinned up on the wall, specifically the article expressing concern for this reputedly new man.

The film is 'about this man you see and this woman you hear? He has

been given a name . . . she hasn't been given a name.' The female body is absent except as a hyperbolic interruption – intercut in short takes of multiple women and the excessive style of the dream sequence, a parody of the Oedipal scenario. This scene concluded Rainer's 1981 sketch of the film: 'What? What is going on here?! That's me in the bed. He and I shouldn't be making love. Jack and *Mama* are supposed to be married in this dream, not Jack and me. But there's my mother standing by the door. Mama, get out of there. . . . And no, I don't believe it. Mama is watching. . . .'<sup>9</sup> This stylistic eruption of the grotesque body, the carnival body, plays back over the film as a travesty.

The film's opening and always shocking sequence of Bunuel neatly slitting the woman's eye in *Un Chien Andalou* is accompanied by a woman's matter-of-fact voice which intimately, conversationally details her difficult week.

*It was a hard week. I split up with my husband and moved into my studio. The hot water heater broke. . . . I bloodied up my white linen pants; the Senate voted for nerve gas; and my gynecologist went down in Korean Airlines Flight 007. The worst of it was the gynecologist. He was a nice man. He used to put booties on the stirrups and his speculum was always warm.*

Art and the everyday intersect; image and voice collide, setting up the strategies of this film of reversals. Daily irritants, a hint of story, and an airline tragedy are disconcertingly funny in their incongruity because so true, so familiar. Caught off-guard, we recognise and laugh.

Alerted to the art historical attack on female vision, the far from blinded spectators watch Jack, the nimble and quick academic and uncaring husband, try to jump over various candle sticks. As the object of our public scrutiny, he should be squirming although his absolute self absorption precludes any glimmer of self awareness. Jack is his own best lover. To our perverse delight, this character (portrayed by two actors as the schizophrenic, postmodern subject) endlessly mumbles Lacan's and Casares' self-congratulatory fantasy: that grateful women massively desire this dull creature, walking in place, going nowhere on his exercise machines, who has sacrificed himself to his own smug, indiscriminate desire. For two hours of intense *bricolage*, this delusory argument is enacted as the joke that it is, yet an infuriating, serious delusion which is predicated on woman being simultaneously everything and nothing, and a self-serving obsession (his language reeks of the most banal narcissism) which precludes political thought or action.

Jack is a catalogue of so many male poses and assumptions about women and politics that he becomes hilarious and repugnant. For me, he is a perfect caricature masquerading as a feminist – in theoretical drag which cannot conceal his powerful patriarchy. As Stephen Heath archly writes:

*As far as male critics are concerned, indeed, the meshing in the academy of some*

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<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Rainer, 'More Kicking and Screaming . . .', op cit, p 11. She appeals to the 'spectator-of-my-dreams' who 'has given equal attention to the fictions and the production of these fictions, to the social relations and to the representation of those relations'.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p 12.

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<sup>11</sup> I have taken these quotations from Stephen Heath, 'Male Feminism', *Dalhousie Review*, Summer 1984 vol 64 no 2.

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<sup>12</sup> Herbert Blau, 'Comedy Since the Absurd', *Modern Drama*, vol XXV no 4, December, 1982, p 557.

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*feminist criticism with French theory, deconstruction et al, has greatly helped, especially in the United States: I can do post-structuralism, Derrideanism, Lacanianism, and feminism in a guaranteed 'radical' cocktail, theory till the cows come home or don't.*

Heath asks: 'To what extent do men use feminism for the assurance of an identity, now asking to belong as a way of at least ensuring their rightness, a position that gets her with me once more?' Regarding the notion of 'woman' as the question for Freud and Lacan, he proposes: 'maybe for as long as *we* ask the question . . . it's too easy to *know*, maybe we're missing the point that the question has been taken away from us, maybe if we really listened that's what we'd hear, the end of *our* question, of *our* question. . . . Feminism has decentered men. . . .'<sup>11</sup> By being placed in the constant visibility usually reserved for women, Jack is decentred in the act of 'getting' women.

On one level, Jack's jargon is very funny. As Herbert Blau writes: 'It is still hard to read that still self-consuming discourse, which offers no proof but rhetorical pleasures, without thinking of it as comic thought, *thought as comedy*. . . .'<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, humourless Jack, without a single ironic bone in his bland body, is not funny; he deploys language as a strategic weapon of subjugation through unremitting boredom/monotony and seduction – means of power which sometimes merge. Subjection rather than subjectivity is the effect of his knowledge.

For example, in the classroom scene while Jack the lecturer drones on, the camera, like the zombied, bored, aggressively frustrated students, becomes restless, rudely leaves the room, and explores the modern and fashionable loft/classroom, tracking from the all-white, perfectly stylish kitchen to the bathroom of glass-block decor. Along with subjection, discourses of fashion (as symptoms of class and property) permeate the film (just as fashion has become confused with and sometimes inextricable from art and academia, Barthes' notion of the new as 'the stereotype of novelty'). Labels – Husserl, Heidegger, and Chomsky – are dropped into the hodgepodge of Jack's canned lecture of theory or language as obfuscation, a lazy referral without meaning yet replete with power and tedium. When Jack speaks, language is hyperreal. During this scene, which provoked intense, personal anxiety in my pedagogical soul, a woman's clear voice recounts a tragic story, a politics of the real – the poor, displaced and homeless in the US, and violence in Central America. Meaning occurs at this intersection.

Linked to subjection and fashion, seduction propels and halts the narrative. Like classical cinema's on-screen seduction, the literal seduction of and by theory occurs: Jackie Raynal (quoting Meaghan Morris) and Deller – sensuously swaying back and forth outside the door of the liberal cocktail party talk – carry on a sexed discourse via dualing monologues. Theory is made physical, the verbal lure embodying academics' tantalising suspicion, the underside of conferences: What if all of this discourse of

sexuality as linguistic foreplay were to become real? Like participants at symposia, Jack and Jackie remain unswayed by each other's intellectual 'positions'.

Raynal's is an ambiguous and transgressive masquerade: her sensuous voice speaks Morris' horror show of theory, extravagant, caustic metaphors masked by Raynal's heavy French accent and breathy, arduous intonation. Morris' nightmare scene emphatically depicts one hyperbolic case of the film; Raynal's undulating body and gaping dress suggest an equivalently lusty or scandalous interpretation. Voice, body and text figure an intricate, contradictory and literal discourse of seduction, sexuality interrupted and punctuated by the politics behind the door of the party of disembodied words. Morris' text operates with a sarcastic, witty bludgeon rather than a satiric scalpel. She is no fool and rushes in where angels fear to tread:

*What is happening when women must work so hard in distinguishing the penis and the phallus? . . . Passing from the realm of the theory of the subject to the shifty spaces of feminine writing is like emerging from a horror show to a costume ball. The world of 'theorization' is a grim one, haunted by mad scientists breeding monsters through hybridization, by the haunted ghosts of a hundred isms. . . . Only overalls are distinctly out of place . . . this is the world of 'style.' Women are not welcome here garbed in the durable gear of men; men, instead, get up in drag. . . . If a girl takes her eyes off Lacan and Derrida long enough to look, she may discover she is the invisible man.*<sup>13</sup>

Raynal's very feminine body and French voice, speaking through these clever Australian words, traverses national debates of feminism/femininity – issues of voice and writing – and crosses the censored divides between word and image, mind and body, public and private. This marvelous scene illustrates Mary Russo's 'carnival of theory' including 'semiotic delinquency, parody, teasing, flirting, masquerade, seduction, counter-seduction, tight-rope walking and verbal aerialisms of all kinds', what she calls a 'poetics of postmodernism'.<sup>14</sup>

Cinema has always involved a flirtatious, triple seduction: of the women in the films, of the dating couples in the movie theatre, and of the theorist by the movies – a classical text without intercourse (or, for women, recourse) which is then provided by theoretical discourse which legitimates and eroticises cinema.<sup>15</sup> The history of seduction/destruction is deconstructed in numerous film clips incorporated particularly from 1940s movies (e.g., *Dark Victory*, *Gilda*, and *In a Lonely Place*) but including avant-garde films and *Night of the Living Dead*, the latter a wonderful parody of Jack, unruly audiences and family romance.<sup>16</sup> The clips are critiqued and serve as critique in complex reversals. Strong female stars dramatise women's double bind, sacrificing their desire and grateful to 'real' men – an endless retelling of Casares' fable as cinema's classical model of pleasure. Perhaps most importantly, Jack sits onstage in psycho/

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<sup>13</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'The Pirate's Fiancee', in Meaghan Morris and Paul Stratton (eds) *Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney, Australia, Feral Publications, 1980, p 33.

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<sup>14</sup> These quotations are taken from Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in Teresa de Lauretis (ed), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, forthcoming from Indiana University Press.

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<sup>15</sup> See Patricia Mellencamp, 'Made in the Fade', *Cine-tracts* nos 11-12, Winter, 1981.

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<sup>16</sup> During this terrific scene, the audience begin to fight with each other while, and oblivious to, the bloody, violent film nightmare escalates. Dutiful onstage Jack is also oblivious to the pandemonium of rebelling spectators; perhaps like us, they just can't stand him and his endless, platitudinous analysis any more. Perhaps it is also a version of the artist explicating her films to audiences on the independent travelling circuit – usually standing onstage, in front of the screen which has just shown the 'new work' – a process that has its own dynamic or inertia, pleasures and dangers.

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*The Man Who Envied Women*: an on-screen staging of patriarchal academicism.



<sup>17</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Room 101 Or a Few Worst Things in the World', in Andre Frankovits (ed), *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene*, Glebe, Australia, Stonemoss Press, 1984, p 98.

<sup>18</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'The Pirate's Fiancee', op cit, p 152. I am referring to Colin Gordon's edited collection, *Power/Knowledge*, which appeared around the same time in 1980, published by Pantheon in New York. Perhaps it's only a matter of the 'Zeitgeist' and not conspiracy theory; yet would publishers really have wanted in 1980 Morris' and the Australian volume's more sacrilegious attitude which included feminism of all things?

cinema/analysis, in front of the movie screen which for so many years has investigated and punished women. This staging, a very apt materialisation of contemporary film theory (Cinema/Psychoanalysis/Subjectivity, merging the audience/critic with the psychoanalyst), is defined as male territory. Cinema provides incriminating evidence and is the cage of film theory.

There is a fourth seduction – of female scholars by male theorists, a hazardous fall-in diagnosed by Morris. While many feminist writers have, with painstaking propriety (the good daughter approach) or outrageous (dis)respect (the sassy, semi-bad girl tactic), sought for instances of women's subjectivity in modern theory by meticulously producing either 'ruptures' or 'readings' of deconstruction, Morris works with a concise and playful sledge hammer, suggesting that we 'take our eyes off theorists long enough to look', and issuing warnings that our modern, scholastic lovers are anti-heroes: 'Yet we may . . . wonder whether the fascination of television enthusiasts for Baudrillard is not like that of feminists for Lacan. The great seducer, says Baudrillard, is the one who knows how to capture and to immolate the desire of the other.'<sup>17</sup>

Regarding Foucault and women, Morris wrote in an earlier essay (in a dossier or set of working papers on/about Foucault, a project which was copied and successfully marketed in the US under different editorship yet with a *remarkably similar* content to its earlier, Australian counterpart): 'In fact, the nicest thing about Foucault . . . is that not only do the offers of a philosopher to self-destruct appear to be positively serious. . . . but that any feminist drawn into sending love letters to Foucault would be in no danger of reciprocation. Foucault's work is not that of a ladies man.'<sup>18</sup>

These very wise cracks explain why this film both harshly mocks Jack's posturing as the voice of Foucault (a lifeless impersonation and a charade of knowledge deployed solely as power) and employs Foucault's method: the film is an archaeology of discourses of art, politics, daily life and jokes. For Rainer, Foucault is valuable; coming from Jack's mouth, his ideas are garbled and twisted. Although with Jack it is tempting, Rainer refuses to throw this baby out with the bathwater.

It is exactly the theoretical language which has irritated rather than amused or unsettled many critics, perhaps unsure of its paradoxical status as critique. For example, in a detailed, perceptive analysis, Helen de Michel writes: 'Theories of feminism and language take up an inordinate amount of time in this film . . . the audience must sit through an interminable lecture by Jack on Foucauldian theoretical analysis [perhaps 'interminable' is exactly the point of this scene]. . . . What may be important ideas to those who read Foucault become an exaggerated and frustrating parody for the general audience.'<sup>19</sup> Parody is a major point of the film; however, in order to assess its work, one must know the object being parodied. It's not enough to merely recognise parody, which de Michel does, and it's not sufficient to denigrate or dismiss the parodied texts which are integral rather than peripheral. Knowledge, like boredom, is self-inflicted and in this scene leads, like the camera, away from 'theory' to its comparison with political imperialism. While the parody of theory is accomplished, the intrusion of politics catapults parody into satire, if not straightforward critique.

In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon's assessment that parody involves 'another work of art or coded discourse in a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding, which establishes difference at the heart of similarity'<sup>20</sup> relates to feminist strategies of 'rewriting' and 'revising' as well as to debates regarding postmodernism. However, unlike the negative emphasis in many postmodernist critiques which inscribe a passive audience, her model of parody involves not only a relationship between two texts but stresses an audience capable of understanding the parodied text: 'pleasure comes from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual bouncing . . . '.

Like *The Man Who Envied Women*, parody 'exists in the self-conscious borderline between art and life, making little formal distinction between actor and spectator, between author and co-creating reader'.<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon's emphasis on enunciation which 'enlists the audience in contradiction' further reiterates feminist theory, although the close affinity is not noted: parody is a form which activates 'in the viewer that collective participation that enables something close to active performance'. This shared, close encounter between audience and author, 'the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique'<sup>22</sup> is 'a way to come to terms with the past'. 'Paradoxically, perhaps, it is parody that implies this need to "situate" art in both the acts of enunciation and the broader historical and ideological contexts implied by that art.'<sup>23</sup> Rainer accomplishes

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<sup>19</sup> Helen de Michel, 'Rainer's Manhattan', *Afterimage* vol 13 no 5, December 1985, p 20.

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, New York, Methuen, 1985, p 8.

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p 32; p 72.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p 99; 9. 101.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p 101; p 109.

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<sup>24</sup> Judy Stone, 'Datebook', *San Francisco Chronicle*. This was a review of the film's opening at the Roxie Cinema in San Francisco; unlike most independent films, this feature-length film had 'real' distribution and exhibition rather than the usual classrooms and one-night stands of most alternative or avant-garde works.

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exactly this dual task, coming to terms with the theoretical/personal past.

Judy Stone reiterates de Michel's unease with the film's level of enunciation: 'Rainer's sly visual and verbal wit refreshingly undercuts the theorizing that may be comprehensible only to sado-masochists who have digested thoroughly *The New York Review of Books*, *The Village Voice* and all the works of Michel Foucault, the French philosophe. Even so, Rainer could have done with less of it. . . .'<sup>24</sup> While Rainer's wily wit does undercut theory, this enthusiastic review, like the first, posits a 'we' (the critics and the audience, albeit a specialised one) against a 'they' – those who read theory, mainly in New York.

However, as Rainer so wisely knows, theory – which in context and history is political, sometimes with radical effects – is migrating and being commodified as fodder for the art world as well as academia, in both overlapping contexts often depoliticised, turned into undergraduate gimmicks or fashionable passwords for exchange and seduction – a situation brilliantly portrayed in the cocktail party scene and the many, diverse representations of gentrification *taking place*, literally, in New York. In this depleted passage, primary sources along with politics and integrity are lost; tertiary derivations by venture ventriloquists promulgate empty catchwords frothing with inflated currency or righteous hype, while boutiques and artists' lofts displace the working class. Theory, or art, becomes a hobby that is 'done' (I 'do' theory) like cooking, rather than a practice of politics and belief. This selling of generic theory (and the sell-out of artists and academics) also appropriates feminism as a singular, apolitical plaint or whine which can be incorporated (like poor, small countries, the aged, the homeless) by the official culture of art, academia, and journalism and then declared solved, old-hat or dead.

Rather than trashing 'theory,' Rainer is witnessing and judging migrating discourses of power as a politics of defusion. This is not an anti-theoretical film, although it is archly anti-patriarchal; rather it is insistently theoretical, historical and personal. By a friendly and deadly inquisition of the story of male subjectivity (theory's constant focus) as it bleeds into US foreign and local policy, the film examines masculinity as a house built of precariously yet effectively stacked words.

Because lifeless theory is yoked to the male body and voice and not to the lively variety of succinct, women's voices and feminist theory which thread political lucidity, compassion and wit through the film, the real irritant and object of boredom might be man, who, like the historical theory of the subject, when radically dissected rather than decorously deconstructed, is not interesting or helpful to women. The cluttered, male monotone is infinitely less fascinating and knowledgeable than the wise kaleidoscope of women's voices, images and issues which swirl like a whirligig through the film. Running through the projector and our minds like a Möbius strip, the thoroughly feminist film has two parallel tracks which share the same terrain but can never intersect.

Rainer throws down a gauntlet of language by breaking and entering men's stories with abandon. Famous discourses are estranged, alien, and not very good listeners. Jack frequently wears earphones while street-talk, conversation and jokes surround him. A technically brilliant and casual orchestration of bits of synched (and non) image and dialogue are picked up from performing passers-by on New York streets, restaurants, and other public places in a *tour-de-force* cacophony of Manhattan commentary and friends.

As Bakhtin argues and the film produces, 'Understanding is in search of a counter-discourse to the discourse of the utterer.'<sup>25</sup> The film is a dialogue in search of counter discourses, not resolved or closed in the end by the analysis of 'a-womanliness': 'I can't live without men, but I can live without a man. . . . But I know something is different now. . . . Not a new woman. . . . A-woman is closer. A-womanly. A-womanliness.' The multiple use of the prefix 'a' is not insignificant – being not woman and being a single woman, at the same time.

Rainer's heterogeneous women – including the women of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* in the poster about which no one speaks – are heard and when seen, multiple, or they occupy that powerful place of invisibility and authorship behind the scenes into which they can enter at will, which Rainer does. Women – articulate, politically astute, and friends – are everywhere in this film, speaking with each other, interrupting Jack, and posing difficult questions: the relation of the artist to local and international politics; personal quandaries of the body, aging, race and class. To echo Heath's earlier remark, the (no longer singular) question has been taken away from men; the film is the end of *their* question, of *their* question, and the end of woman *as* the question.

The film also raises the question of postmodernism (and men envious of feminism) and charges this belaboured, portmanteau word with new meanings. Postmodernism – so rapid a commonplace in the US – has become an art historical, pejorative label which provides entrance into fashionable discourse (much like 'The Password' routine in *Horsefeathers*) as a sign of mutual knowledge often with only the vaguest notion of what it delineates; the shibboleth emits pre-packaged, dismissive or 'with-it' connotations. Yet, this neologism is paradoxical and promising: while postmodernism devours everything, is stuffed full of art and interpretation like a Roman orgy or Harpo's baggy coat, it is also an emptied byword, without definition or limits. (In uncanny ways, this 'all and nothing' is eerily akin to the representation of women in 'master narratives'.)

However, as the film so lucidly ponders, 'all and nothing' can portend possibilities rather than liabilities – neither to drain nor fill the peremptory idea but to let it vacillate, unlocatable, traversing boundaries, advancing neither polarities nor answers. In addition, the scavenging mentality of postmodernism in search of the new also reconnoitres with the past, resulting in a hybrid straddling 'the old and the new' which can involve

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (trans Vlad Godzick), Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p 22.

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radical (and humorous) collisions producing an art of conflict or unsettling synthesis.

Through counter visual and verbal dialogues (an *extraordinary* over-tonal and vertical montage of sound and image tracks), *The Man Who Envied Women* prefigures the attributes of postmodernism: denying dichotomies, bipolarities, the ontology of media boundaries; dissolving binary oppositions, including the great cultural fault, the divide between the sexes (Rainer reverses roles and reinscribes division in this feminist rewriting of difference); breaking down genres and the distinctions between art movements such as Pop, Op and Kinetic; blurring the borders and status between art and popular culture, overturning the rigid divide that separated modernism from mass culture; indeed, challenging modern culture's definitive premises – the centrality of the usually masculine author/genius, the uniqueness of the precious object of Art, and the entrenched, sacred distinction between it and mass or popular culture.

Intricately and abruptly shifting levels and 'quality' of representation – Super 8, shaky video, granular images shot from the TV screen, and advertisements – and like Godard's films and videotapes which mix commercials, translations, quotations, parables, monologues and dialogues, lectures and essays, the film is a mesh of artificial and official with political and personal discourses: 'With satire, however, you have free rein . . . you can turn pedagogical, dissertational, narrative, conversational, lyrical, epic. . . . In satire, genres are mixed because the persons speaking are mixed.'<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard's remark suggests the juxtapositions and derailments which don't always shock us as Eisenstein advocated, but insistently shake us into politics and knowledge through collisions which equate 'discourses' of theory with policies of power: for example, the displacement of the city's aging and working class by art and academia, and US aggression in Central America.

The duplicities of modern life and theory – patrolled borders which Rainer crosses with glee and impropriety – include the decorous, hierarchical split between public and private, subject and object, word and image, symbolic and imaginary, soul and body, men and women, and (eternal) woman and (historical) women – the first term containing the unseemingly eruption of the second. (Hiding the aging and homeless in drab institutions, concealing military actions, and covering up urban land takeovers with slick boutiques and cafés are concrete manifestations of the reality beneath the veneer of the public sphere which grabs and protects precious property by camouflaging material conditions.)

Perhaps because of the public intrusion of the second term, or minor premise, many theorists of postmodernism have diagnosed a bleak, if not wretched, subject terminally awash amidst the pastiche objects of art, a cultural stagnation nostalgically ascribed to 'loss' – of narrative, the dominance or mastery of vision, personal stories of authors, and history – the latter an agglutination of the first three traumas.<sup>27</sup> Against this negative

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity', *Camera Obscura* 12, Summer 1984, p 119.

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<sup>27</sup> I refer to the recent, comprehensive exegeses of postmodernism by Hal Foster, Andreas Huyssen and Fredric Jameson in, *inter alia*, *New German Critique* no 33, Fall 1984, 'Modernity and Postmodernity'.

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grain, *The Man Who Envied Women*, like so much recent feminist work, is culturally (even locally) and historically grounded, parodic, laced with arch or caustic irony, sharply critical and very funny – a work announcing gains as well as losses and troubling the account of postmodernism. Rainer's women are witty, intelligent, sometimes middle-aged, heterogeneous subjects. She commandeers Fredric Jameson's central, pessimistic gloss of postmodernism as pastiche and schizophrenia, 'the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents'<sup>28</sup> – actually a good (and inadvertent) account of urban gentrification ('reality into images'), representations of women, and women's domestic, private lives.

As Teresa de Lauretis sweetly suggests: 'It may well be, however, that the story has to be told differently. Take Oedipus, for instance.'<sup>29</sup> Feminist films and video are telling stories differently *and* looking at 'difference' differently – the latter, a key to feminist purchase on current writings on postmodernism, including the notion of 'the other' form, for example, psychoanalysis and Mikhail Bakhtin. As I argued in 'Postmodern TV', women are the schizophrenic subjects of postmodern culture, just as television is its degraded object.<sup>30</sup> Yet rarely are either subject or object mentioned except for feminism *as* 'other' – an estrangement containing vestiges of Lacan's endless division/entrance of the subject in language, the split between 'I' of enunciation and 'I' of enounced, and Bakhtin's overseeing 'other,' his 'thou' who defines the self in a continual inner and social speech.

I want briefly to elaborate this strange situation of feminism's acclaimed marginality and unstated centrality through a selective reading of an essay by Hal Foster, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art'. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, Foster's delineation of the 'primitive style' resembles premises of feminist art and argument – its 'style' and stance against an imposed 'biologic' which determines women as the 'eternal', the goddess/whore ideal. Foster provocatively asserts that 'the rupture of the primitive, managed by the moderns, becomes our postmodern event'; he concludes with an afterthought invoking feminists for whom 'there are other ways to narrate this history'<sup>31</sup>.

Thus, by extension and elision, feminism becomes the repressed, managed rupture of postmodernism – marginalised and thus contained, like 'primitivism' earlier, *outside* the debate as the unknowable, appropriated other, along with other races and cultures, through the convoluted benevolence of local colonialism. In exegeses of postmodernism, 'woman' is not fascinating as she was to modernism; 'feminism' is, perhaps because in this dazedly conservative 1987, it is the only lively, scholarly game in town with something other than the new 'careerism' at stake.

However, if feminism is going to be invoked as a desirable dialogue or a discourse of salvation, it is time to realise (as *Born in Flames* argues and Rainer recognises although eliding the differences, to a degree) that white, intellectual, middle-class feminism is not 'other' in the sense of being out-

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<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, WA, Bay Press, 1983, p 125. Ask anyone in the US what postmodernism is and the reply will be a facile 'pastiche'. Ask for a definition of 'pastiche', and the answerer will oppose it to 'parody'. Don't pursue this line of questioning. Change the subject.

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<sup>29</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, op cit, p 156.

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<sup>30</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, 'Postmodern TV: Wegman and Smith', *Afterimage* vol 13 no 5, December 1985.

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<sup>31</sup> Hal Foster, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art', *October* 34 Fall 1985, pp 64, 65, 69.

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side a shared history and politics of class and race; white women are 'other' for psychoanalysis' male subjects and analysts for whom 'woman' is the problem; 'she' grants male identity and exists as an inscrutable mystery, in both labours serving as the object of male desire/fear rather than as a subject.

Indeed, an exceedingly primitive unconscious is detailed by the modernists, Freud and Lacan. Within this European, historical account of male sexuality/subjectivity, yes, 'woman' is other and lacking, truly a problem – with an essay by Freud 'On Femininity' but no comparable piece 'on masculinity'. But for political and fashionable US writers on postmodernism? The blind yet concerned visage of Oedipus, encountered later on in the story, miserable at Colonus, again misreads women or feminism which is alluded to rather than translated and which servilely works, without recognition, as both source of the argument and/or the condemnation of postmodern culture. Rainer's film intercepts and deranges these benevolent discourses of envy which result in suppression of women and feminist writing.

As Mary Ann Doane, Linda Williams and I concluded our introduction to *Re:Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, the task for feminists involved 're-vising the old apprehension of sexual difference and making it possible to multiply differences, to move away from homogeneity . . .'<sup>32</sup>, a notion picked up, then amplified, in de Lauretis's analysis of *Born in Flames* to include 'differences among women' and 'differences within women': 'differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together and often enough in conflict with one another'<sup>33</sup>. These delineations of heterogeneity, together *and* in conflict, of historical women are resolutely against the notions of 'purely' and 'merely' usually applied to eternal 'woman' and veer from mastery through the otherness of colonisation and imperialism, dichotomy and hierarchy.

Strategies of heterogeneity are apparent in Rainer's film and in recent feminist cinema and video: 1) the emphasis on enunciation and address to women *as subjects* (including dialogues of multiple voices and the use of private speech), a reciprocity between author, text and audience involving collective/contradictory identifications and shared situations (a rare experience, indeed); 2) the telling of political and personal 'stories' rather than 'novels' of grand master narratives; 3) the inextricable *bricolage* of the personal with the theoretical; 4) the performance of parody and the telling of jokes, with irony and wit as women's allies rather than enemies; 5) an explicit critique and refashioning of theories of (male) subjectivity constructed by vision; and 6) a transgression of the boundaries between private and public spaces and experiences, entering with intimacy bordering on indiscretion the lofty 'public sphere' – unsettling these metaphorical and real spaces of power by looking and talking back.

This speech of women is not like classical cinema's dialogues; it is not sacrificial but is frequently ironic ('Sometimes, fresh from reading Fred-

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', *Re-Vision*, op cit, pp 14-15.

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<sup>33</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema', *New German Critique*, no 34, Winter 1985, pp 164, 168.

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ric Jameson, I could play his game . . . '); deeply serious and moving, as in Martha Rosler's two analyses of the photographs pinned on the wall; interruptive (Rainer bending over into the film when Jack is reading *Playboy* with 'Will all menstruating women please leave the theater'); and joking. Its sound does not come *at* us, as truth or power, but is *with* us and reciprocal, the laughter from the audience signalling recognition. 'What Rainer stages', writes Mary Russo, 'is a dialogical laughter, the laughter of inter-text and multiple identifications. It is the conflictual laughter of social subjects in a classist, racist, ageist, sexist society. It is the laughter we have now: other laughter for other times. Carnival and carnival laughter remain on the horizon with a new social subjectivity.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Russo, *op cit.*

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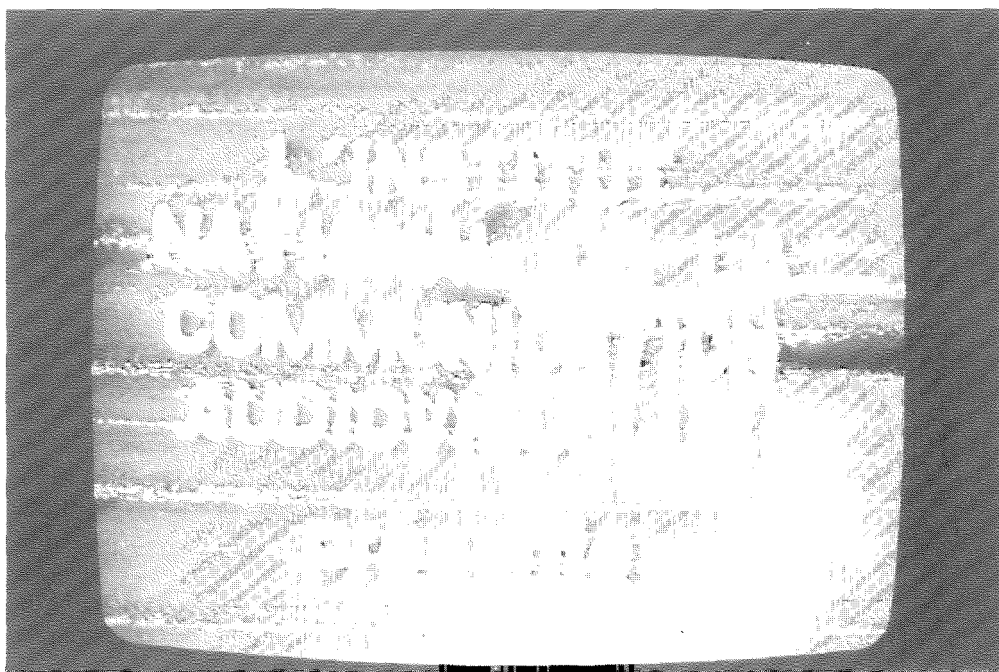
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# IMAGINARY CINEMATHEQUES:THE POSTMODERN PROGRAMMES OF INA

BY SUSAN BOYD-BOWMAN



*Imagine a galaxy containing two quite different worlds. In the first, the relations of power and knowledge are so ordered that priority and precedence are given to written and spoken language over 'mere (idolatrous) imagery.' . . . In the second world – a much larger planet – the hierarchical ranking of word and image has been abolished. Truth – insofar as it exists at all – is first and foremost pictured: embodied in images which have their own power and effects. . . . It is not the function of language here to explain the origins of the Image, its functions or effects, still less its meaning(s) (which, as they are plural, are not worth talking about). In this world, the vertical axis has collapsed and the organisation of sense is horizontal (i.e. this world is a flat world.)*

– Dick Hebdige<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Hebdige, 'The Bottom Line on Planet One', *Ten-8*, no 19, 1985, p 41.

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, 'The In-Difference of Television, or Mapping TV's Popular (Affective) Economy', in this issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Hebert, 'Parade of Cheap Dreams', *The Guardian*, December 3 1986.

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IT IS THE AIM of this article to examine the 'flat world' evolved in some of the *ateliers* of French television's Institute for Audiovisual Communication (INA). Over the last ten years, in a series of innovative audiovisual magazine programmes about communication, INA has, I believe, traversed a shift from modernist to postmodernist practice in broadcasting, a shift which articulates the 'hyper-modernism' of French cultural theory while retaining many of the features of modernism itself<sup>2</sup>, particularly its ethical impulse. The ransacking of the archives and the ironic gestures which collapsed image and meaning at the high water point of this experimentalism were addressed to a viewer with an engaged subjectivity, one who in the age of simulacra remembers what Deep Images were about.

Acknowledgement of 'the crisis of contemporary culture' has lately seeped to the British side of the Channel, and journalists as well as academics in the UK are scrutinising post-modernism as the cultural dominant within such forms as rock music, advertising, the visual arts, and style magazines. Hugh Hebert, in his contribution on television to the *Guardian's* recent series on postmodernism, cited Troy Kennedy Martin's lecture at the 1986 Edinburgh International Television Festival<sup>3</sup>, in which he spoke of the 'post-modernist parade' of micro-dramas, the tendency of narrative to shrink to the dimensions of the commercial, in which words lose out to a play of ever speeded-up images, what Hebert dubbed 'the re-invention of silent movies'. Like Hebdige, Hebert is alarmed by the sacrifice of the Word on the altar of the Image. The French, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, have embraced the etiolation of signification, and INA is carrying the message to the BFI and Channel Four, where some of its policies have been held up as an alternative to mainstream television: its archival practice (everything is kept), its production mode (publicly financed workshops employing freelance directors), its access to transmission (minimum hours guaranteed on the national networks), and its formal innovation (the incorporation of avant-garde film and video practices into dominant genres).

Among state-funded broadcasting organisations, INA is in the unusual situation of having *both* responsibility for the French audiovisual archives, *and* a specific brief to produce creative and experimental productions for the national networks. The conception it adopts is of 'memory as a source of creativity', with the audiovisual considered a central part of the national heritage. This patrimony has been put at the disposal of a host of programme-makers recruited from the cinematic and video avant-gardes, whose work was influenced by the fermenting French intellectual climate. The waning of a modernist belief in politics, history and communication among some intellectual cadres has occurred amidst cataclysms in the political economy of French broadcasting, culminating in the recent expansion and deregulation of television channels.

Fredric Jameson describes the energetic texts of late capitalism as embodying advanced communications technology to mesmerise the audience with sheer technique of representation itself: a rocketing into

'postmodern hyperspace'<sup>4</sup>. The challenge to official culture veers toward the abolition of history, narrative and ideology. The work done by INA in the early '80s raises interesting questions about attempts to disrupt the discourses of French public service broadcasting and to problematise its concepts of popular memory, cultural heritage and authorship. The heterogeneous collages transmitted under the series title *Juste une Image* contest the cultural values and signifying practices which predominate elsewhere on television. They break down demarcations between high art and popular culture, for example. But they also represent a trend toward fetishisation of the Image, a postmodernist play that is less interested in what its original materials may once have meant, or even what they may signify to viewers today, than in the radical (masculine) subjectivity of the text. Women may be the schizophrenic subject of postmodern TV<sup>5</sup>, but INA's retention of the principle of the male genius author has acted as an anchor on the drift away from grand narratives. *Juste une image masculine*...

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<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Capitalism', *New Left Review*, July/August 1984, no 146, p 87.

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<sup>5</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, 'Postmodern TV', *Afterimage*, December 1985, vol 13 no 5.

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## L'INSTITUT NATIONAL DE LA COMMUNICATION AUDIOVISUELLE

INA was formed in 1975, as a consequence of the split-up of the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Français, the French national broadcasting organisation, into six new *sociétés*. The legend is that INA was a mistake, an afterthought in the form of an amendment to the 1974 Television Act which swept together various activities which had been previously overlooked: experimentalism, administration of the archives, and staff training. INA's unique combination of functions was born amidst the break-up of the Gaullist consensus which had sustained the legitimacy of the ORTF monopoly. The objectives of the 1975 reform were to introduce better management and financial accountability, to end what the Government considered the ideologically tendentious nature of much programme output, and to create a series of bodies which would deal flexibly with the anticipated changes in mass media technology. In effect, it ended the vertical integration within the state channels, and hived off production from programming.

The relations between INA and the rest of French television are governed by articles of legislation: the three channels broadcast each year about 60 hours of programmes produced and/or co-financed by INA. Its role is that of an experimental producer, with a mandate to seek both public and private partners, in France and abroad. The brief was to use fresh talent, to invent new modes of television expression, and to apply new techniques (e.g., computer animation). The mid-'70s were not an auspicious period for audiovisual experimentation in France: invention was disappearing from the cinematographic domain; there was a decline in independent film-making; and the networks were concerned with 'via-

bility', and would soon be reluctant to transmit the minimum hours of INA output vouchsafed by statute.

Meanwhile the Socialists in July 1982 confirmed INA's responsibility for 50 years of sound and radio archives, 35 years of television archives, and 30 years of cinema newsreels. (In total, some two million items are stored on floppy disc, film and tape.) This law also conferred on INA title to works produced and broadcast by French television from five years after their first transmission, now amounting to over half a million broadcasts. These archives were also the raw materials with which INA began to produce one important strand of its own output.

Meanwhile INA embarked on an adventurous film production policy, supervised by Manette Bertin, who had belonged to the ORTF's *Service de la Recherche*, and who sought co-productions to finance work by an impressive roster of film-makers.<sup>6</sup> In the '70s she foresaw the breakdown of the distinctions between cinema and television, and amongst genres. She saw the role of her department as voluntarily marginalised on the frontiers of television, inventing prototypes for the rest of television by bringing in *auteurs* from outside. INA applied to television production the same auteurism as had obtained in the cinema; it would allow directors to assert their creative autonomies, whatever the risks. There was no necessary contradiction between creativity and public taste. To a suggestion from *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1981 that INA's idea of experimentation was overly intellectual, Bertin replied that 'this very *dirigisme* is illusory because the image never says what you want to make it say. It has its own discourse.'<sup>7</sup> But after the success of getting Godard's *Six fois Deux* on FR3 in 1976, the climate changed, as the channels were now permitted their own production capacity and were less keen on INA's perceived hermeticism.

A populist retrenchment occurred in the early 1980s, though INA's corporate identity was somewhat enhanced by the Socialist victory of 1981 and the 1982 creation of a High Commission for broadcasting. INA now represents its output as a resolution of the 'apparent contradiction between culture and commerce', while trying to rebut the charge of elitist intellectualism. Its president Jacques Pomonti announced in 1983:

*INA has no intention of becoming a refuge for the kind of elitist intellectualism which would considerably restrict its potential audience. All experimentation and creative activity runs this risk and INA has sometimes succumbed in the past. . . . We intend to respect all television as a means of mass communication which appeals to everyone; this will require constant mediation in order for what we do to be accessible to the greatest number. . . . A deliberate attempt to simplify or talk down on the grounds that this makes for accessible programming merely shows contempt for the viewer and should be avoided by television. But it is also true that to speak in the coded jargon of privileged minorities whilst completely ignoring the tastes and abilities of the television viewer shows an equal contempt for that viewer and we ought also to avoid doing so.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Among the film-makers commissioned by INA were: Rivette, Godard, Marker, Duras, Ivens, Pialat, Allio, Straub/Huillet, Angelopoulos, Syberberg, Cozarinsky.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Entretien avec Manette Bertin', by Serge Le Péron and Serge Toubiana, *Cahiers du Cinéma* TV supplement, 1981, and translated by Jill Forbes in *INA: French for Innovation*, London, British Film Institute, Dossier 22, 1984, p 11.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Pomonti, quoted in Jill Forbes, *op cit*, p 2.

What happened was that INA experimentalism shifted from the modernist avant-garde, in terms of its preoccupations with style, authorship, didacticism, to postmodern de-contextualisation of the image. I will try to trace this evolution across the three major audiovisual magazine series produced between 1975 and 1983.

## HIEROGLYPHES

Magazine programmes had enjoyed a vogue in the '60s heyday of French television, but *Hiéroglyphes*, begun a year after INA's creation, was the first magazine which showcased archive material. The first episode, transmitted on Sunday, September 28, 1975 at 20:30 on FR3, was greeted with a feature in France's most popular TV magazine *Télérama*. Viewers who tuned in would have seen well-known TV journalist Roger Louis (who had been sacked in '68) seated amongst a cluster of folding director's chairs, smoking furiously as he explained the rationale for the monthly series devoted to the image.

The title may allude to a 1973 essay by Roland Barthes ('Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein') in which he defines the term *hieroglyph* as a fragment 'in which can be read at a single glance . . . the present, the past, and the future; that is, the historical meaning of the represented action. . . . The pregnant moment is just this presence of all the absences (memories, lessons, promises) to whose rhythm History becomes both intelligible and desirable.'<sup>9</sup> Barthes is concerned with history and representation, but he describes (*à propos* of the use of tableaux in Eisenstein) what could be seen as characteristic of INA's later magazines: 'a contiguity of episodes, each one absolutely meaningful, aesthetically perfect, and the result is a cinema by vocation anthological, itself holding out to the fetishist, with dotted lines, the piece for him to cut out and take away to enjoy. . . . No image is boring.'<sup>10</sup> The press kit summarises Roger Louis's to-camera introduction:

*Why Hiéroglyphes? Three thousand years before our era, the Egyptians in the age of the pharaoh refined a writing system given to multiple significations founded on the juxtaposition of images representing elements of reality: hieroglyphs. Today images and sounds invade our daily universe. Are these audiovisual signs the hieroglyphs of our civilisation? We have chosen to tackle this huge theme by means of a mosaic of subjects, which are both responses and propositions bearing on each other, on men and on techniques, while confronting the past and the future of the audiovisual. . . . A means of expression as well as of social communication, audiovisual language must still be decoded. It is Hiéroglyphes' ambition to contribute to that end by giving back to the public a taste for the image which traditional television and the commercial cinema have perhaps occluded. (my translation and emphasis)*

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<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image, Music, Text*, London and Glasgow, Fontana, 1977. The essay is dedicated to filmmaker André Techiné, who would also be commissioned by INA.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p 72.

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'We were the very first to decipher the image,' co-producer Louisette Neil



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<sup>11</sup> Louisette Neil, quoted in Jill Forbes, *op cit*, p 19.

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<sup>12</sup> Thierry Garrel, quoted in *ibid*, p 19.

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<sup>13</sup> John Ellis, 'Is it Really Just an Image?', in *ibid*, p 35.

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commented to Jill Forbes in 1984.<sup>11</sup> *Hiéroglyphes* (made on film in 1975/6) demonstrates the main principles of the audio-visual magazine which would be carried on in the later video series *Rue des Archives* and *Juste une Image*:

- 1) a celebration of authorship; each item will be 'signed' by the *réalisateur* who made it;
- 2) the etiolation of the presenter, and eventually of written or spoken commentary to situate the items in relation to each other;
- 3) an eclecticism in the selection of material (spanning the entire history of film and television, the popular and the avant-garde, the foreign and the domestic, etc) enabled by the liberalism of the archive policy;
- 4) the emphasis on subjectivity in form: an aversion to anything which fits within the norms of television.

*Hiéroglyphes* went out on FR3 on Sunday evenings, once a month. Thierry Garrel, the producer responsible for all three series under discussion, commented:

*The channel thought the slot wasn't worth bothering about because there was a film on the other side, but we used to get 3% of the audience. . . . What was important was that people noticed it, and it was talked about in professional circles, among TV people. They were interested in the fact that it was a new kind of programme and also that it looked at images in a non-technical or non-professional way, at the aesthetics, sociology, history, etc. of images. Mind you, when we looked at *Hiéroglyphes* after having done *Juste une Image* we really felt there was too much talk in it, partly because there was sometimes a commentary, but also because *Hiéroglyphes* was much more didactic than *Juste une Image*, even though this didn't show at the time in comparison with what else was going out on television.*<sup>12</sup>

John Ellis points out that the magazine format has the advantage of 'its consistent possibilities for surprise, both in the nature of the material that can be shown, and in the possibilities for startling juxtapositions'.<sup>13</sup> The dethronement of verbal language in favour of the pleasures of visual collage, rarely experienced on British television, became the hallmark of INA's programmes.

The 'hiéroglyphs' of the 1975 French TV series were self-contained, authored, short films, and it was left to the linking segments to foreground the materiality of the image. To music reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann, we see a cameraman focusing and de-focusing the words written on a mirror; each title is shown in positive and negative mode; and the segments also quote Vertov in manipulating strips of celluloid. A typical edition contains five items: number three's menu consists of *Magazitrone*, a prototypical 'scratch' treatment of the most famous presenter on French television, Léon Zitron; extracts from Godard's *Numéro Deux*; a montage of 1914-18 'autochromes' (a colour glass-plate photographic method invented by the Lumières) alongside early recorded music and readings

from a military chronicle of the First World War; *The Birds of Illic*, a dramatically shot natural history sequence of an owl attacking a crow's nest; and finally, *Luca Ronconi: From the Stage to the Screen*, a record of the television adaptation of an avant-garde production of *Orlando Furioso*. There is no pretence of linking these disparate items, apart from the notion of technology attached to the two media men, Zittrone and Godard. On the other hand, each short film has at least a brief voice-over introduction explaining its provenance, and the 'Autochromes' piece, in validating its three elements of image, music and text as 'taken from the archives', lays claim to trying to evoke the past.

## RUE DES ARCHIVES

Two years after *Hiéroglyphes* had expired the same producers launched a format in which individual directors were asked to construct essays from archive materials. *Rue des Archives* was made on video, and unlike *Hiéroglyphes* before it or *Juste une Image* after, it relied entirely on television archive material, rather than mixing found with commissioned work. The result was a highly impressionistic series of montages. To quote from INA's translated press release for the first series of six in 1978:

*Named after the Paris street housing the National Archives, this series is exclusively composed of extracts from the archives of French television and provides the audience with an opportunity of strolling around that vast collective memory.*

*Departing from the conventional classifications according to genres, specific themes, historical periods, it gives these documents a different dimension and a new resonance.*

*The first six programmes of the Rue des Archives series are original essays in which the authors/film-makers confront – according to their personal vision – striking and singular moments from television's past.*

The formula was refined in the 1979 series, which covered the themes of love, destiny, children, French history, and spectacle – all as represented on television. Numbers 4 and 5 were called *Un Petit Manuel d'Histoire de France* and were directed by the Chilean film-maker Raul Ruiz, who was interviewed by *Cahiers* for their 1981 supplement on television:

*INA was interested in developing relations between the cinema and television, and so tried to bring to television some auteurs, people who had a distinctive approach. . . . At the time they wanted to call on foreign auteurs (there were Terayama, Angelopoulos, etc). I realised that they considered us as authors, as a little apart from the others.<sup>14</sup>*

Garrel was producing *Rue des Archives* at the time, and proposed the subject of French history to Ruiz: 'It was a matter of editing together serials

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<sup>14</sup> 'Entretien avec Raoul Ruiz', by Serge Daney, *Cahiers du Cinéma* TV supplement, 1981, op cit, p 41.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p 41.

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<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1985, p 118.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Entretien avec Raoul Ruiz', *op cit.*, p 41.

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Mapping the Territory of Raoul Ruiz', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1985, vol 52 no 612, p 8.

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and historical dramas, putting them in chronological order, and showing the History of France as television saw it', from the Gauls to the invention of the cinema, often intercutting between several versions of the same episode, as in the sequence about Jeanne d'Arc, in which five different actresses interpret the character. Whereas other *Rue* directors chose to montage discrete sequences, Ruiz attempted to juxtapose images within the frame:

*I wanted to take into account the multiplicity of interpretations of History and I had the idea of making a film with two bands of images in parallel. I showed two (and sometimes three) films at a time, which I could mix at the last minute on video by a simple wipe passing between one and another, in such a manner that you could feel that while you were watching one event there were others happening. Not just different versions of the same events, but events in parallel.*<sup>15</sup>

Ruiz began by viewing programmes and studying history textbooks, and found in them not hieroglyphs but very strong stereotypes. As Jameson commented on *la mode rétro*, it seemed as if we were 'condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which remains forever out of reach'.<sup>16</sup>

*I saw that these stereotypes were used by directors of the Right as well as the Left. An historian friend helped me to understand that these stereotypes had their origin in the nineteenth century. . . . All of French History was that of the formation of the State and all moral discussion in these films bore on that theme. Most of the films I saw . . . were in effect bits of the same discourse. Everything that works for the centralised state, no matter what the means employed, is good, and everything against it is bad. . . . For that reason I chose to work with the actual school-texts (four manuals running from the end of C19 to 1968) and to have them read by children of from eight to sixteen years old, girls. I adopted the idea of having them read these texts for the first time. . . . Then I played with these three elements: the double image, the maladroit readings of the schoolbooks, and the very stereotypical mise-en-scène of the history of the formation of the State.*<sup>17</sup>

The element of parody in *Un Petit Manuel*, which consists entirely of these quotations from television plays and re-enactments of Great Moments in French History, is the date of the given event which appears digitally in the upper-right corner of frame, and the pedantic labelling of each extract. The proliferation of stereotypical representations reaches a subversive pitch when Ruiz gets to Napoleon, and follows a clip from Gance's *Napoléon* with his own frenetic montage of shots from the preceding parts of the programme, in what Rosenbaum describes as 'a helter-skelter heap of near-subliminal flashes, one shot per era, which effectively reduces all French history to a hysterical flood of incoherent clichés'.<sup>18</sup>



*Un Petit Manuel  
d'Histoire de France :  
Raul Ruiz reworks  
Napoléon.*

What does the viewer make of this postmodern pastiche? The problem with Ruiz's *Short History of France* is similar to one pinpointed by Thomas Elsaesser in his interview with Edgardo Cozarinsky, the maker of *La Guerre d'un Seul Homme* (INA, 1981): the spectator cannot orient him or herself within the text.<sup>19</sup> Ruiz's thesis about the formation of the State implies a logic to the radical heterogeneity of clips which I suspect is not evident even to a French viewer, and the sole basis for our perspective is simple irony. The depthlessness of this particular series of the four *Rue des Archives* seasons is encapsulated in the title of the following week's audiovisual essay, *La Vie est un Spectacle*, a montage of clips from non-fiction television which 'offer the public privileged moments of a "hyper-real" world where one can read the signs of a society and an era'. In the 1981 *Cahiers* TV supplement in which Ruiz was interviewed and INA copiously praised, critic Sylvie Blum was commenting on the disappearance of intelligibility:

*Television does not return us to a preconstituted reality. It manufactures a language of images which has its rules, its rhythms, its own time. . . . We would say that the new space is perhaps that of dream or poetic space. . . . Analogic associations, syntactical disorder, indeterminacy of meaning.*<sup>20</sup>

Depthlessness had gone too far. For later series of *Rue des Archives* producer Garrel was obliged to choose directors from within television and more pedestrian themes.

### JUSTE UNE IMAGE

The title of the third audiovisual magazine produced by INA comes from Godard's famous maxim: *Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image*

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Interview with Edgardo Cozarinsky', *Framework Summer* 1983, no 21, p 21.

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<sup>20</sup> Sylvie Blum, 'Y a-t-il quelqu'un qui regarde?', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 1981 TV supplement, op cit, p 90.

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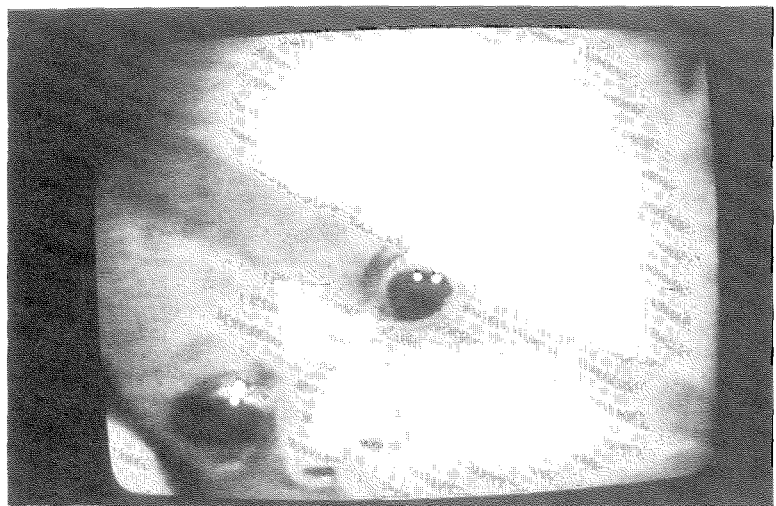
<sup>21</sup> Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, p 111.

<sup>22</sup> Thierry Garrel, quoted in Jill Forbes, *op cit*, p 19.

(‘This is not a just image, it’s just an image’) formulated during his Dziga Vertov period. MacCabe comments in his 1980 book that Godard ‘insists on the fact that no image has a life of its own outside the institutions which exist to fix its meanings. . . . “in every image we must know who speaks” – thus Godard, and this imperative demands that we uncover the terms of address in the cinema, the terms in which we are constructed as spectators’.<sup>21</sup> For INA, on the contrary, the new series represented a shift from the hermeneutic and the ideological to the *bricolage* of fragments; it continued an evolution away from didacticism, and towards a cultivation of the image for its own sake. Commentary was dispensed with; the stylistic emphasis was on video effects. The titles were abstract and elliptical: a hammer raised, lowered, and finally shattering an invisible pane of glass, a close-up of a baby’s eyes, the materialisation of the series title in a frame of electronic blue. (The earlier two series’ titles had notional human points of view: the cameraman of *Hiéroglyphes* or the promenader through the *Rue des Archives*.) Producer Thierry Garrel:

*What one can say is that **Juste une Image** was not called that for nothing, and that it talked about television, about the cinema, about early photography, about ethnography, but that all these things were approached obliquely, and the idea was to take all aspects of the image and juxtapose them. . . . What you could perhaps say is that there is a reason why INA should have produced a magazine programme of this kind, because INA occupies a key position in the audiovisual field. . . so we really are centrally placed and this gives us a vantage point which allows us to have a more general view of the image. So that in **Hiéroglyphes** and even more in **Juste une Image** our individual and collective experience resulted in a sort of imaginary cinémathèque. . . .*<sup>22</sup>

Garrel and Neil go on to explain the differences from *Hiéroglyphes*, which was also made up of discrete items (‘one subject – fade; the next sub-



*Juste une Image*: from the elliptical title sequence.

ject – fade, and so on') but which did not strive for the effect of *bricolage*:

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, pp 19-20.

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*Juste une Image* was much more complex because every number was a work in its own right and we were much more interested in the combination of the different elements within each number. So what we were working on was the relations between images and the ways one image might recall or prefigure another, in which a relation might, for example, be established between an image from the early years of cinema and something ultra-modern and contemporary. And I think the idea was also to give the viewer more work to do, and to let him make the connections in his head between one image and another.<sup>23</sup>

In conversation with me, Garrel spoke of the 'secret order' in which items were juxtaposed, along a matrix of binary oppositions (between mono and colour, TV and cinema, sound and silence, old and new, etc), and also of using the 'normal' to hammock the 'experimental'. Here is how the producers described the series in the publicity material:

*Juste une Image* is a poetic excursion into the world of today's and tomorrow's images, with its fashions and techniques, its debates, its secrets, its dangers, its magic and its seduction. It is a mosaic of points of view about images from here and elsewhere.

Each of the numbers of *Juste une Image* consisted of from seven to a dozen sequences of varying lengths. Of the total of over 60 items, only a third were of French origin (including shorts from INA on research into the image), and the rest foreign, representing a cosmopolitan selection of the video avant-garde; half were 'original' (including items made by manipulating found material) and rights to transmit the other half had to be bought. The major categories of material that made up the series as a whole were:

1. video art,
2. film-makers' work in progress,
3. presentation of archival photographs,
4. television from other countries,
5. animation and other special effects,
6. 'hieroglyphic' moments from the television archives,
7. classic cinematic moments, particularly self-reflexive ones.

So, for example, number 7 begins with an extract from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, prefaced by nothing more than the caption '1929' (when shown as part of *Hiéroglyphes* five years before, the Vertov extract had been mediated by a presentation to camera by Henri Langlois, Director of the Cinémathèque); a voice-over intervenes at one point with some propositions about the montage principle. But it is for the viewer to decide whether these propositions have intertextual status. Number 7 does have a notional unifying theme: cities round the world (in addition to Moscow, we will get Cairo, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris, Baghdad and New York). But this theme does not constrain the selection: *Introduction to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee is tangential at best, since it

consists of a reading of that book's preface in which Agee (as the programme notes put it) 'challenges the very notion of documentary, what he calls "this obscene and terrifying work" and denounces the misuse of the camera, "the central instrument of our times"'. Although the piece begins with a clip from Pare Lorentz's *The River*, and uses one or two of Walker Evans's photos, archive material is largely eschewed. The reading is stylised: in a high-rise apartment we see a man (Robert Kramer) listening to a tape and performing what appears to be a simultaneous translation in American-accented French. Time passes between one passage and another, and occasionally phrases are superimposed (e.g., *journalisme honnête*) and the camera wanders off to the Paris skyline outside the window. This deconstruction is hammocked between *In the Street*, a humanist film record of the slums of New York on which Agee collaborated in 1946 with Helen Lewitt, and *Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan*, by Brian Eno, which uses the television screen vertically to give a disturbed vision of the Manhattan skyline. (A vertical roller caption instructs us to turn our television sets sideways!)

The seventh edition of *Juste une Image* was also noted for the item *Small Screens in Cairo* directed by Philippe Grandrieux, who became the series co-producer:

*Egypt: 45 million inhabitants, 20 million television viewers, but only 3 million televisions. In among the streets of Cairo, on a butcher's slab, behind a tinker's stall, in the dark corridor of a café, small screens broadcast fragments of programmes. . . . An impressionistic picture, without commentary, of television elsewhere from the point of view of those who look at it. . . .*

But is the identification with Egyptian spectators? The item makes use of a technique to be developed in the *Mine de Rien* series of video postcards (and which corresponds to a trend in video art to much shorter items which trade on a touristic discourse) in which postcard views of a city are momentarily animated with appropriate sound effects. In the Cairo sequence, it is the television screen within these snapshots of urban backstreets which is momentarily animated, producing surreal juxtapositions: for example, an advertisement for cosmetics appears on a TV screen perched on the roof of a car standing in front of the Pyramids. Occasionally there is a cut to the television programme thus framed, and the Grandrieux piece concludes with a montage of Egyptian TV clips, the facts about spectatorship vs. ownership mentioned above, and a sample of the Koran readings which punctuate the daily transmission. But the point of view, insofar as it is possible to find one, is that of the Westerner marveling at the contradiction between what is shown and the viewing situation of those shown watching; the perspective is firmly within the Orientalist tradition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

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Grandrieux was also working on *Pleine Lune*, the unique three hours of airtime that INA was given in August 1983, and which proved a major incursion of INA's current avant-garde practice onto the second state

broadcasting channel, Antenne-2. He had learned video production in Brussels and commented in an interview reprinted in INA's dossier *Quelle Recherche, Quelle Création?*:

*The series **Juste une Image** gave me a better acquaintance with the new technologies, and the opportunity to try out different forms of writing. We made two montage sequences on the television of Japan and of Mexico. We wanted to present Egyptian television, but I hoped to bring in another dimension: television in the course of being watched. . . . The ensemble didn't cost very much, and was a completely new fashion of producing. . . . One can ask if this progress is worthwhile. At one extreme, one can still make 16mm films in black and white without the slightest special effect. No video clip has given me the emotion I felt watching **Un Chien Andalou** by Buñuel. But television is our era, another era, and the person who would work in it must take on the new technologies.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Philippe Grandrieux, in *Problèmes Audiovisuels* no 17: *Quelle recherche, quelle création*, INA, Paris, p 30.

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Number 6 exploited video technology to the full: a montage of a day's transmission on Antenne-2 (*Cadavres Exquis sur A2: Une Journée à la Chaîne* by Gérard Patris) which uses scratch techniques (repetition, jump-cuts, synthesised images) to stitch together clips from television shown on Friday, September 24, 1982, from 11 a.m. to midnight. A digital clock in the corner of the frame records the time of day. To further complicate the montage, the programme is interspersed with a few 'parasites': pieces of video art, mostly North American, such as Joan Logue's *Advertisements for Artists*. So, overlaid with the deconstruction of mainstream television is a flaunting of oppositional practice. Thus a witty re-editing of *Apostrophes*, the intellectual chat-show, in which the sound is speeded up over a montage of cutaways which foreground the participants' body language, is in turn interrupted by *T-Women*, a video of lesbian love-making by an experimental German film-maker. Is this a dialectic of the masculine/feminine, or the intellectual/sensual, or respectable/bohemian, or does its excess merely celebrate the indifference of content in the late-night media flow?

## VIDEO MAGAZINES

The final edition of *Juste une Image* consisted of a video installation, a galaxy of TV monitors suspended in space, on the screens of which fragments from earlier programmes appeared in turn. The series can be seen as part of the incorporation of video art into broadcast television, a guerrilla movement being waged within other national broadcasting organisations, like Belgische Radio en Televisie, BRT and Radio Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française, RTB (the Flemish and French language companies in Belgium, which produce the series *Dienst Kunstzaden* and *Vidéographie*, respectively), and others featured in INA's dossier *Quelle recherche, quelle création?*. It is easy, however, to discern an aesthetic preju-



dice within *Juste* in favour of the cinematic apparatus as against television: viz, the reverential use of clips from films by Dreyer, Vertov, Eustache, reminders of the golden era before the 'mental pollution' perpetrated by television. Video art, as we saw in programme 6, comes to the rescue by restoring the hallucinatory properties of the Image.

The booklet *Video: The State of the Art* which accompanied two seasons on Britain's Channel Four discusses the international distribution of the work of video-makers, and quotes Carl Loeffler's predictions that television will become the major arena for video artists and that 'a Television Art' will emerge, a synthesis of existing popular forms and creative experimentation.<sup>26</sup> The assumption is that proliferating channels will allow greater audience choice and strategies of narrow-casting, which will open up opportunities for a populist television art. Loeffler's prediction seems to be coming true amongst European state broadcasting networks. Channel 4's *The Ghost in the Machine* featured some North American video art also shown on *Juste une Image*, as well as some items from INA itself. The question is whether this international television art can ever be 'populist', or is rather a cultivation of technical complexity and audiovisual fragmentation for their own sakes, a product of 'the obscure desire towards extra sophistication'<sup>27</sup>, and addressed to an elite, technocratic and masculine audience.

## POSTMODERN TELEVISION

'Artificial Insanity', the title of a Belgian TV project, is a useful catchphrase for the postmodern aesthetic. At a recent cultural studies conference Dick Hebdige made a lightning summary of his polemic on postmodernism cited at the beginning of this article:

*... the collapse of the didactic mode of address; the re-working of relations between high and low cultures; the re-distribution of knowledge by means of private communications technology; the eclipsing of traditional intellectual formations and the institutions that support them; the commodification of culture and information, a schizoid mode in which the subject is a pure screen for networks of influence (intellectual but not affective); [resulting in] the reliance on electronic simulation, an obsession with pastiche and parody, the triumph of the signifier in a profusion of depthless surfaces, etc.*

The sketch, drawing on Jameson's seminal NLR essay<sup>28</sup>, applies very well to *Juste une Image*.

Hebdige goes on to describe how the artful fragments that make up the copy of *The Face* flatten out the world:

*... Flatness is corrosive and infectious. ... In the land of the gentrified cut-up, as in the place of dreams, anything imaginable can happen, anything at all.*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Carl Loeffler, quoted in *Video: The State of the Art*, Channel Four, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'On the Sublime', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed), *Postmodernism*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986, p 10.

<sup>28</sup> Dick Hebdige, paper at the Association for Cultural Studies Conference, Northeast London Polytechnic, March 21-23 1986; Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', op cit.

<sup>29</sup> Dick Hebdige, 'The Bottom Line on Planet One', op cit, p 42.

INA's audiovisual magazine programmes, what Garrel would call the 'imaginary cinémathèques' (and what Hebdige might call 'designer TV programmes'), work on the premise that while no image is boring, none is better than another, unless passed through the creative sensibilities of a real *auteur*, and that there is no necessary link between the chains of signifiers late-night on Antenne-2 and the social world. The technology of reproduction replaces the politics of representation.

The crisis posed by current broadcasting legislation is whether INA will retain access to the means of production and distribution long enough to give their prototypes a chance against what INA sees as the homogenisation of the international economy of broadcast television. INA is now preparing its most expensive and prestigious project, a six-part series called *L'Image et son Pouvoir*, financed by French, Swiss, Belgian and Canadian money, which defines propaganda extremely broadly: 'Nothing in this century of the audio-visual has been accomplished without employing propaganda to impose itself.' Whatever the deconstructive practices of its favoured *auteurs*, INA has retained a modernist distrust of the affective as opposed to the cognitive dimensions of communication. The contradictions are evident in their translated explication of their principles of assembling archive material:

*Never hesitate to time and space jump, thanks to editing; similarities and differences in time periods and countries always clarify and make relative the propagandistic discourse. . . . Never fail to identify explicitly the nuances between overt works of propaganda and those which are tendentious, oriented, militant, promotional, commercial. . . . Give up any moral judgement concerning the notion of propaganda which is, perforce, pejorative in character. There is no 'good' nor 'bad' propaganda. It exists.*<sup>30</sup>

Resistance or nihilism? While much of INA's innovation is more symptomatic of the international communications market than subversive of it, the very fact of its being transmitted on television raises crucial questions about the implosion of the media and about the function of the intelligentia in dominant institutions: opposition or incorporation? I am arguing that the evolution of this particular strand of INA's output manifested various shifts: in broadcasting technology from film to video, in cultural production from *auteurism* to *bricolage*, in theoretical influence from Barthes to Baudrillard, in aesthetics from style to simulacra. If 'the image has become the final form of commodity reification'<sup>31</sup> then INA, with its mammoth archives, visual effects studios, and new French airwaves to fill, is sitting on the postmodern guilt market. If INA retains its licence to exhume hieroglyphs from the national storehouse, will it return those images to the world of social relations or leave its viewers gazing at the flat screen?

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<sup>30</sup> INA, *Image and its Power: Views on Propaganda*, mimeo 1986.

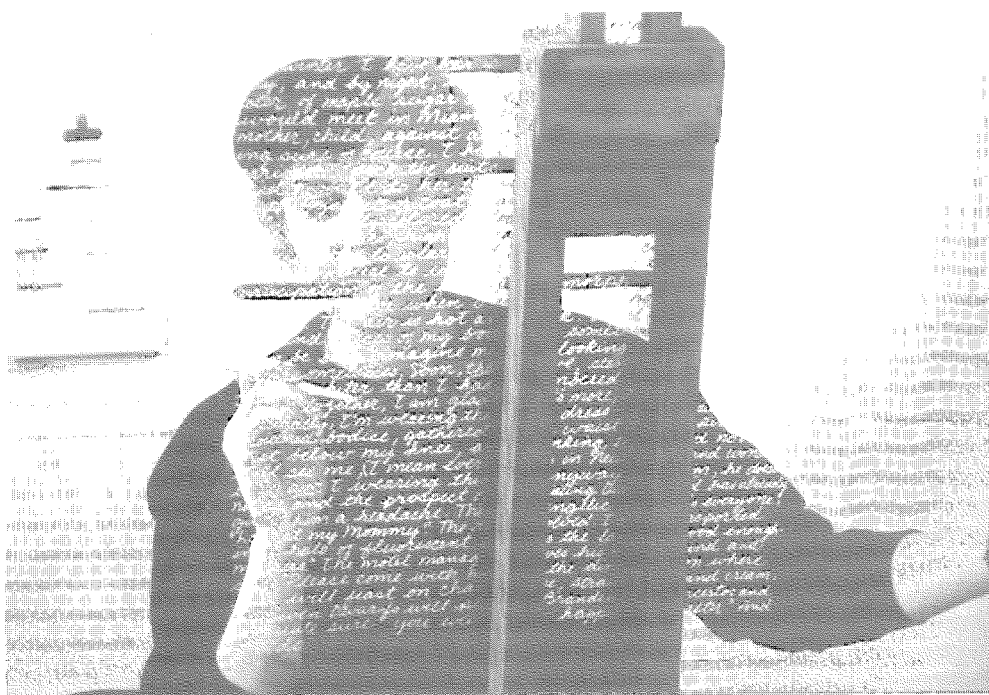
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<sup>31</sup> Guy Debord, quoted in Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *op cit*, p 66.

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# POSTMODERNISM, TELEVISION AND THE VISUAL ARTS

JOHN ROBERTS REVIEWS  
'STATE OF THE ART'



Producing the postmodern: Mary Kelly at work in *State of the Art*.

The short history of TV's critical representation of the visual arts is a fairly uninspiring one. In fact to talk of a *history* of the critical representation of the visual arts on TV is to validate an area of work that is on the whole ad hoc and untheorised. From John Read's profile of Henry Moore in 1951 (incidentally – and ironically – the first full-length BBC feature on any of the arts) to Robert Hughes' pan-national

extravaganza, *Shock of the New*, in 1980, the visual arts on TV have suffered perhaps more than any of the others from that familiar mixture of ruling class paternalism and bourgeois ahistoricity. Television has used art either to bolster the Reithian virtues of good taste and disinterested connoisseurship or for the purposes of ridicule. A good example of both these approaches was Kenneth Clark's

*Civilisation* (1969) whose mandarin historiography and scoutmasterish moralism – culture as a Job Well Done, to paraphrase *Monty Python* – did little to undermine the received image of art as the hot-house product of embattled genius.

There have of course been exceptions to this rule, in particular writer John Berger and director Mike Dibb's *Ways of Seeing*, made in 1972 as a counter-blast to Clark's series, and the Open University's *Modern Art and Modernism* course (1983) produced by Nick Levinson. If *Civilisation* demonstrates the barest grasp of historical and political causality, *Ways of Seeing* and the Open University course make it their *raison d'être*; art is remapped within the discourses of social production. However, both programmes have a tenuous link with contemporary practice; their status as cultural interventions is ostensibly historical and methodological. Moreover as teaching aids the Open University programmes were made outside the constraints of mainstream broadcasting. Thus, although we can point to both series as dislodging the positivism and cutaneous romanticism of the conventional profile or dramatised biography, their field of reference was retrospective and generally academic. It wasn't until *Shock of the New*, which borrowed the lecture format from *Ways of Seeing*, that an attempt was made at contextualising contemporary art and its diverse trajectories in any large-scale popular sense. However, if Hughes, as a full-time jobbing art critic for *Time Magazine*, avoided the querulous scepticism of TV's in-house presentation of modern art, his swaggering authorial *diktats*, rapid costume changes, and reinforcement of the Story of Art disappointed hopes for a programme on contemporary art that took on social context as more than picturesque backdrop.

Under such an onslaught of mystification and populism it is no surprise that critics and producers in the '80s should ask some searching questions about the way art is presented on TV. In a recent publication, *Broadcast Television and the Visual Arts* funded by Television South West<sup>1</sup>, such questions are raised for the first time in some detail. As Nick Levinson says: 'On television, the history of

how and why art exists, as well as why we have certain attitudes towards it, have not been prised apart from the values art has been given by the dominant classes. Although the broadcasting world has largely ignored such questions, they have become central to much art criticism, history and teaching in this country for nearly two decades.'<sup>2</sup> If Levinson's contribution sets the critical agenda – that there is massive room for improvement in the treatment of the visual arts – contributions from two of the other invited producers, Melvyn Bragg and Nigel Finch, outline just how entrenched the intellectual equivocations of mainstream arts broadcasting continue to be. This is rooted in what might be called the 'transmission problem': 'television itself will never provide the complete answer to the purist painter's problem for the simple reason that looking at a television set is different from looking at a painting' (Bragg)<sup>3</sup>. 'Art itself on television, is at best . . . a tease, an introduction not a substitute for the real thing and the producer's function is to find a way of compensating on television for what has been lost' (Finch)<sup>4</sup>.

Art is a poor or unstable partner of TV because at no point can it be adequately replicated. All art can do is make polite off-stage noises. Setting aside the post-object media of performance and video and their singular broadcast potentiality (an area in fact that Finch has a certain amount of practical familiarity with), the obvious question is: why should the 'making up' for loss of visual accuracy be a question of *compensation*? In short, little discussion is advanced in Bragg and Finch's contributions to the effect that the inevitable gap between artwork and its reproduction might be a productive *release* for analysis. The assumption that TV has to be a convincing, vivid mediator of the direct encounter between

<sup>1</sup> *Broadcast Television and the Visual Arts*, TSWA, 1984 (co-published in *Art Monthly* February-July 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Nick Levinson, 'History of Mystery', *ibid*, p 43.

<sup>3</sup> Melvyn Bragg, 'Twilit Intensity', *ibid*, p 18.

<sup>4</sup> Nigel Finch, 'Margins of Error', *ibid*, p 36.

spectator and artwork is simply the product of an unproblematised account of the recovery and production of meaning from art; the intractabilities of reproduction have become red herrings in a much deeper debate over art's relationship to knowledge. What makes art on TV potentially so interesting is its notational value. Which does not mean that works are thereby devalued but that their illustrative status is in a position to serve what television does best: the taking up and talking through of ideas.

It is this deeper debate over art's relationship to the conditions of knowledge post-Ways of Seeing and the Open University course that has formed the basis of a series of critical initiatives over the last few years from John Wyver and the Illuminations production company, who have to a great extent been at the centre of the re-theorising of the art documentary. Like Levinson, Wyver seeks a distance from the 'primacy of vision' model. Unlike Levinson, though, Wyver is a critic of the lecture format, the profile and the dramatised biography. As he argues in his own contribution to *Broadcast Television and The Visual Arts*, all three forms 'share certain fundamental features which can offer only a narrow and limited range of understandings of the visual arts'<sup>5</sup>. These are a focus on the singular presentation of opinion and information and a residual moralism. The words of the expert or critic 'are presented as an unmediated "truth", and only on the rarest of occasions are they challenged or contradicted or undercut'<sup>6</sup>. For Wyver therefore what art documentaries have conspicuously lacked is not simply an emphasis on 'social context', but a critical acknowledgement that cultural artefacts are the product of competing value-systems. As such, if art documentaries are to be beholden to the complexity of their subject then there must be a materialist commitment to the foregrounding of contradiction. That this has become a commonplace within post-'trivial-realist' film theory does not detract from its novelty and practicality within an area of documentary work which, as Levinson has said, has dragged palpably behind other areas of film production.

Illuminations' first attempt at what has provisionally been called a postmodernist

documentary by Wyver was their critical overview of the New British Sculpture (Woodrow, Cragg *et al*), *Just What Is It That Make's Today's Sculpture So Different, So Appealing?*<sup>7</sup> If this was a generally lightweight treatment of the emergence of a much publicised sculptural 'movement' (too insistent with its declamatory atonal soundtrack by David Cunningham on *not* being a conventional documentary), it nonetheless offered a range of strategies and forms that placed the discussion of art outside the closures of the centralising authorial presence, be it Clark's connoisseur or Berger's intellectual-as-caring-person. A mixture of interviews with artists, their dealer and critics (pro and con) situation shots and studio shots and images of publications, provided an intertextual grounding for the acknowledgement that the meanings of art are multiply authored and reproduced.

It is this distance from the positivism of the conventional profile and the sanctity of the expert's presentation that forms the televisual framework of Illuminations' most ambitious production so far, *State of the Art*<sup>8</sup>. Produced by Wyver, directed by Geoff Dunlop, written by Sandy Nairne, and co-funded by Channel Four and WDR Cologne, this six-part series on contemporary art in Britain, Germany, the US and Australia in fact offers, in virtue of its resolute displacement of the objective professional art historical voice, a putative paradigm shift for the art documentary. As Sandy Nairne says in the preface to the book which accompanies the series: 'I proposed that the divisions of the programmes would not be based on national schools, particular styles or chronological change, but on issues current both in art and in society as a whole. Secondly, the films would not be about the lives of the artists, their eating or sleeping habits, nor

<sup>5</sup> John Wyver, 'From the Parthenon', *ibid*, p 25.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p 28.

<sup>7</sup> Broadcast on March 3, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> In between *Just what is it . . . ?* and *State of the Art* Wyver produced a series of artist videos, *Ghost in the Machine*. These were broadcast every Tuesday between Jan 7 and Feb 11, 1986.

indeed about artists at all. What we have produced is a discussion of art itself, seen through extensive interviews with them, focusing on the ideas that have helped form their art and circumstances in which it is viewed and interpreted. It was clear that there could be no objective position, that many of my ideas had been formed by what I had read and those I had listened to. Nor could our project be independent from the circulation of ideas and assessments in the artworld.<sup>9</sup>

But even if such a series vindicates Wyver's Benjaminesque call for a dialectical use of quotation and image in its distance from the profile and dramatised biography, it would be a mistake to assume that *State of the Art* is simply a reaction against the weaknesses and omissions of these forms. For *State of the Art* is the direct product of a distinct set of theoretical interests that have burgeoned over the last ten years or so. In short, the series is the product of that critical culture of the image that we now take for granted as cultural studies: the rise of film studies, The New Art History etc, etc. The absence of a central authorial presence is thus not just a formal acknowledgement of the objectifying powers of representation but a structural recognition. The space for the intellectual or critic as universal commentator has been eroded in the face of the proliferation of art's contents across many subject positions, ideological fronts and expressive resources. *State of the Art* therefore reflects and participates in the wholly transformed culture of the visual since *Ways of Seeing* in 1972 and the re-theorisation of modernism during the late '70s and early '80s. The extensive reorientation of critical agendas in the art schools (the generation of new content spaces outside the 'figurative' and modernist abstraction canons in the wake of the advance and employment of specialist discourses in relation to the 'new media') has broken down the received hierarchies of competence, value and interpretation that Kenneth Clark was reinforcing and Berger reacting against. This is not to say that this 'revolution of means and ends' in the '80s has been completely victorious (Jocelyn Stevens' closure of the Environmental Media department at the Royal College is one of the more widely publicised recent attacks on

such gains) or that certain conventional modernist prejudices still do not hold (in some cases for good reason against the earnestness of the post-auratic) but that the twinned myths of the Great Western Tradition and unmediated expression which allowed modernism to speak for a narrow range of – predominantly white, male, middle-class – interests, are in retreat.

*State of the Art*'s commitment to the work of women artists and artists of non-European origin or background is a clear indication that the relationship between art and its production and history is in the process of being decisively transformed. The false democracy of TV can of course be deceiving (as I will discuss later) but nonetheless it is extraordinarily gratifying to see a number of women artists and black artists not just offering up forms of ghettoised opinion, but participating in an international culture of the image. And if there is a general political point that the series makes then this is it. For in jettisoning the critical machinery of conventional art historiography (biography as the authentic ground of artistic intention, stylistic comparison) the programmes draw out the content of the work in relation to those categories, discourses, *real* tendencies in the real world, that gives the art its place and legibility within the broader culture of ideas as a whole. A familiar approach maybe – even within certain sections of progressive broadcasting – but a wholly new model for the presentation and discussion of the visual arts.

The series is divided into six critical thematics: 'History, the Modern and Postmodern', 'Value, Commodity and Criticism', 'Imagination, Creativity and Work', 'Sexuality, Image and Identity', 'Politics, Intervention and Representation' and 'Identity, Culture and Power'. Each programme employs interview material (direct to camera), spoken quotations (from critics, sociologists, writers, etc), situation shots, contextual 'scene setting' social footage and occasional music.

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<sup>9</sup> Sandy Nairne in collaboration with Geoff Dunlop and John Wyver, *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1987, p 9.

Working within the orbit of a post-Godardian aesthetic (whose anti-narrative strategies Wyver actually traces back to the early, and fragmented, English modernist documentary tradition)<sup>10</sup> the juxtaposition of quotation and image serves to dynamise the relationship between artworks, events and ideas. However, this is not to say there is lots of fast editing (on the contrary Dunlop, Wyver and Nairne tend to slow the pace down in the interests of scholarly contemplation) but that location shots and quotations continually call the art back to struggles in the real world. Thus if we are to distinguish the series from the basic juxtaposition techniques of the modernist documentary tradition alluded to (if we can characterise it as a tradition at all), it lies in the *systematic and self-conscious* use of quotation and contextual material as a means of showing that art, ideas and the world of objects and events interact and interpenetrate as parts of a single process. In this distinction lies a world of philosophical difference.

Before I address myself to the postmodernist implications and assumptions of this intertextual approach, it is necessary to present a brief synopsis of each programme.

### History, the Modern and Postmodern

The programme opens with a *mélange* of urban noises and languages, in recognition of our global electronic culture as the motive force of capitalist hegemony. 'Everything is being totalised and at the same time atomised' says Leon Golub. The post-war capitalisation of communications technology is thus presented as the primary focus for the self-understanding and critical perceptions of artists. Faced with the injuries of modernity and the binding logic of mass culture where do the responsibilities of artists lie? The main body of the programme takes up this question in the response of three European history painters (the Italian neo-classicist Carlo Maria Mariani and the German allegorists Jorg Immendorf and Anselm Keifer) and American installation-artist and dream-collator Jonathon Borofsky, to the post-war Western experience of modernity. The

engagement with, and retreat from, modernity in the work of these artists supplies the postmodernist framework of the series: the freeing of the artist from the linear (from modernist evolutionism and technological determinism, hence the redemptive emphasis on *painting history*) and the universal (the myth of the artwork or artist speaking for the whole).

### Value, Commodity and Criticism

Programme two considers five places in which 'validation and valuation' occur: the private gallery, the private collection, the public museum, the art magazine and the public site. How is critical evaluation arrived at and what are the economic interests that underpin it? Interviews with dealers Michael Werner and Mary Boone, the director of the Deutsche Bank's collection Dr Zapp ('the bank has never, in its 120 year history, seen itself as a purely financial institution') and the producer of *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*, the collector Douglas Kramer ('I'm obsessed with owning') give a clear insight into art as a paranational *industry* and increasingly consumerist source of social value (particularly in the States). In the following section – an interview with Richard Koshalek, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles – the part the big museums play in the ratification and extension of this process is examined, in particular their mediation between artists and industry on collaborative urban gentrification projects. These forms of managerial control (of both resources and meaning) are then placed up against the 'independence' of art's critical culture. The programme ends with interviews with the editor of *Artforum*, Ingrid Sischy, and one of its regular contributors, Thomas McEvilly: 'Criticism clearly has its role as negative criticism. Criticism means really to criticise everything.'

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<sup>10</sup> John Wyver, 'From the Parthenon', op cit.

Working with a post-romantic view of artistic skills as the product of training (the development of cognitive interests), programme three offers an overview of the vicissitudes of artistic creativity. In interviews with Joseph Beuys, Anthony Gormley, Miriam Kahn, Howard Hodgkin and Susan Hiller the status and process of artistic production is variously contrasted. 'For me a nurse is also an artist, or of course, a doctor or a teacher' (Beuys). 'When I create these landscapes . . . I'm not actually in control' (Kahn). 'I find it very difficult to think of my activity as an artist in social terms' (Hodgkin).

### Sexuality, Image and Identity

In programme four we are back in the world of commerce and business. The programme opens with the preparation for a photographic shoot for *Woman's Journal*. As with the preceding programmes the real serves to focus the site of art's contestation and operation, in this instance the circulation of images of woman as desired object. There are interviews with Cindy Sherman, Alexis Hunter, Eric Fischl, Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger. The interview with Kruger presents one of the key motifs of the series' postmodernism: cultural politics as a particularist struggle across many fronts. 'I think to label something political within culture today is really to disarm it in a way, and I think that it tends to ghettoise particular activity. I think that there is a politic in every conversation we have, every deal we close and every face we kiss.'

### Politics, Intervention and Representation

The programme opens with a shot of the offices of Independent Television News in London. Stuart Hall is quoted, arguing that the function of the media is to provide an underlying ideological unity through which disagreement takes place. The question of the political in art is taken up further as a multivalent resistance to

this logic in interviews with Leon Golub and Terry Atkinson on history painting, Hans Haacke on intervention within the museum structure, Victor Burgin on male sexuality, and Pete Dunn and Lorraine Leeson on community photography.

### Identity, Culture and Power

The final programme takes up the centre/periphery debate in relation to cultural identity. In a sense the last programme negotiates the 'positive' side of paranational late capitalism: the breakup of national cultural boundaries. The suppression and release of localised cultural differences has become the global terrain of postmodernism's 'war of position'. The programme singles out Australian art as a vivid example of this, given both that white Australian artists feel marginalised in relation to Europe and the US and that Aboriginal culture stands in a marginal and oppressed relation to Australian settler culture. There are interviews with Terry Smith on the Sydney Biennale, Thomas McEvilly on the question of 'cultural diffusion', the Aboriginal painter Michael Nelson Tjakamarra on his painting *Possum Dreaming* and the Australian artist Imant Tillers on the virtues of working small: 'For an artist to be producing Kiefer-size canvases and expecting them to be shown outside Australia, it's absolutely ridiculous.' The programme then switches to the condition of emerging black art in Britain in interviews with Lubaina Himid, Donald Rodney, Sonia Boyce and Sutapa Biswas. However, if black art here is shown to be essential to the renewal of British culture, in the final section, which documents the recent media collaboration between Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, the pitfalls of being absorbed into the art market as exotic spectacle are graphically depicted. Nevertheless, the series ends on an upbeat note, a quotation from Amílcar Cabral: 'Liberation for us is to take back our destiny and our history.'

In terms of those interviewed, places visited, works filmed and issues raised, *State of the Art* is



a successful attempt at mapping out the complexities of art production under capitalism today. The series reveals in all its variation just how massive the extension of art's production (and theorisation) since the late '70s has become under a Western economy that has both increased in real terms the spending power of those in employment and released those without full-time employment – and no prospect of full-time employment – into self-determined activities. As the series notes, approximately 35,000 students graduate from visual art courses in the United States every year, 1400 in Britain, 1900 in West Germany and 850 in France. Admittedly only a small percentage continue to work professionally in any successful sense, but nonetheless the yearly accumulation of numbers (and burgeoning reputations) has brought about an unprecedented expansion of commodity production in the '80s. This, in turn, has generated a huge amount of promotional/theoretical work as the commodity struggles to enter discourse and public validation.

However, if *State of the Art* reflects these conditions in its extensivity of reference, its critical terminology makes clear that the expansion of the day-to-day culture of art, as in the Victorian salon system, offers no comparative expansion in the critical reception of art – quite the opposite. Given the huge amount of kitsch and transparently cynical work being produced and defended under the rubric of this so-called aesthetic flourishing, the judgments the series makes about certain kinds of work – its critical adequacy – on the whole 'get it right'. Whatever one thinks individually about Leon Golub, Terry Atkinson, Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin, Joseph Beuys, as representatives of positions within, broadly speaking, a culture of capitalist resistance, their work is unavoidable. It is in this sense that, despite the seeming richness of the culture of art today, certain critical values still hold (the raising of 'truth-claims') that gives the series its intellectual integrity and clarity. If one were to point to a single achievement of the series it would be its attempt to *secularise* art's production and consumption. By showing that

art participates *in* the world, is made out of extant cultural and cognitive materials, it also shows art to be at work *on* the world.

If my praise is fulsome here, the series nonetheless does not escape substantive criticism. This rests on the very form in which this secularisation is presented. For although the structure of the programmes – context shot, quotation, interview – creates a dialectical interchange between work, world and discourse, the accumulated effect is one of the equalisation, and at times de-contextualisation, of contents and positions. As a privileged reader I may be able to sort out who's who and why they are there and what kind of reputation they have, but, for someone without the relevant information, the relentless flow of uncontextualised information can be perplexing. This is not to have a clarification mania where every reference has to be flagged – ambiguity and inference are of course integral to the pleasures of reading – but a concern with the fact that the extensive use of quotation and artists deracinated from their specific histories can lead to a glossing over of differences. Thus, for example, in the final programme we are neither made aware that the work of the black British artists is on the whole the product of a very young (and marginalised) culture, nor that the quotation from Rasheed Araeen which introduces the section is from an artist whose work and writing has done much to lay the foundations for the culture the young black artists are discussing. Twenty-five years of work are swept aside.

Similarly, although all the artists seem to be participating in an art world that is free and equitable in its exchange of ideas, given the basis of such ideas in differing ideologies, the economic positions of the artists remain very different. The series fails to explain the (by no means fixed) hierarchy of values that the market attaches to certain media and contents. As a result the anomalous link between economic and critical success is blurred. Such differences of course can be extrapolated (it is fairly obvious that the market success of Howard Hodgkin's work is dependent upon its modernist-picturesqueness, or that the success of Jean-Michel Basquiat's 'voodoo' painting rests on



Outside the gallery: a billboard Barbara Kruger image in *State of the Art*.

the art market's appropriation of the graffiti phenomenon) but are never made part of an explicit argument. This has a lot to do with the programmes' perception of such issues as being 'internal' to the art world and therefore of a distracting, specialist nature. If the absence of specialist jargon is to be commended, however, the absence of discussion around *why* certain artists have made certain choices is regrettable. Thus we don't learn about the political intentions that are bound up with certain choices and the effects that follow. *Why* do Leon Golub and Terry Atkinson choose to be history painters, or *why* do Barbara Kruger and Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson choose to work as photographers, on the whole, outside the gallery network?

This levelling out of issues around means and ends (who is speaking to whom and for what reasons and to what effect) has much to do with the loss of causality which inevitably results from anti-narrative film strategies. But it can

also be attributed to what I would call the 'culturalist postmodernist' framework adopted by the programmes. By this I mean a tendency to view the expansion of forms, interests and contents of art since American abstraction and the reified counter-tradition of social realism from a 'substitutionalist' political perspective, i.e., as a contributory progressive force in the putative radical extension of bourgeois democracy. As Sandy Nairne says in the conclusion to the accompanying book of the series: 'In the end all art is political in its resistance to the global culture, which is intent on suppressing views and values that resist its spreading and monotonous patina. As artists challenge the assumptions of conventional history in the making, they create the fragments of a resistance, working to discover not simply who they are, but how we all might be.'<sup>11</sup> In one

<sup>11</sup> Sandy Nairne et al, *op cit*, p 245.

sense this is of course true – art *does* have emancipatory effects – but in the series the multiplicity of art's points of resistance to the values and interests of global capitalism are presented outside any political programme that would make such prefigurative truths democratically available. Thus the programmes tell us *why* art is important but do not articulate the basis upon which such human flourishing might be democratically achieved; the word socialism is conspicuously absent. In essence we are not told straight what the political stakes for artists, 'working to discover not simply who they are, but how we all might be', actually are in our culture. The absence of any class perspective on art's 'fragmented resistance' – the huge gap between art and the working classes – leaves the aesthetic truths of art stranded from any real transformative political programme.

Behind the series' articulation of art's expansion across subject positions, ideological fronts and expressive resources, there is a familiar intellectual and political theme: the automatising of politics. Lyotard's theorisation of politics as linguistic 'jousting' (politics as competitive language games)<sup>12</sup>, Laclau and Mouffe's Eurocommunist line on politics as discursively constructed and separate from any non-discursive material interests<sup>13</sup>, and the post-structuralist legacy of the dissolution of politics into powers, in short the whole critical machinery of the New Revisionism, is at work behind the series' failure to sort out, or rather make explicit, the real structural limits placed upon art's democratic extension. This is not to say that the art the series deals with is not the product of real democratic transformations within the Academy or that a Gramscian 'war of position' is not the best option within the institutions of our culture, but that particularism no matter how radical can only serve as a cover for capitalist interests. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued: 'Of course an attack on capitalist hegemony must take the form of challenging this ideological division and expanding the meaning of democracy, but the problem is hardly just a linguistic one. The divide between the spheres in which capitalism can permit democracy to operate (and even here

it can do so only up to a point) and those in which it cannot, corresponds to the insurmountable divisions between antagonistic class interests. Here, if not before, there must be a break in the continuum from one form of democracy to the other.'<sup>14</sup> *State of the Art* fudges this – and I say this because what is important about the series is that art is shown to be dealing with ways of doing and being that might have a say in the way a culture not determined by capital might be organised – by presenting the democratic interests of art *as if* they were participating equitably within bourgeois democratic culture. Thus it is one thing to say there is a politic in every conversation we have and every face we kiss, but another to equate the political effects of different subject positions.

However if I am critical of the series' conflation of postmodernism with a culturalist, conjunctural politics, it is not my intention to deny the validity of postmodernism as a category. *State of the Art* is clearly right in contextualising postmodernism as a proliferation of critical contents and forms after the closures of high modernism. In these terms it has real explanatory power. However, much contemporary art theorising has tended to extrapolate from the aesthetic-cognitive to the epistemological-political, insofar as a break with the linear in modernist aesthetics has been conflated with a break in the 'grand narrative' of class politics – Lyotard being the egregious link figure. That this fails quite baldly to pass the first test of 'theory takeover' – the plausible explanation of large amounts of data – has not prevented a large amount of silly, ameliorist and pessimistic writing on the death of the 'new', 'reason', 'modernity', etc. If *State of the Art* avoids the worst excesses of this (though

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism*, London, Verso 1986, p 135.

Lyotard is given his tuppence worth) the particularist politics of the series nonetheless defers to the view that postmodernism has ushered us into a post-Marxist epoch. That such an important issue is not debated *within* the programmes is perhaps the biggest disappointment of the series.

The use of a systematic intertextual aesthetic as the basis for documentary work therefore has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it clearly offers an advance in the complexity and texture of argument over the

profile and lecture, but given the tendency of anti-narrative strategies to weaken causality, it can also reduce ideas to a heterogeneous soup. The liberation from the 'pretence of relaying a Real'<sup>15</sup> (a Real that is traceable back to the interests of a single author) can just as easily fall into a politics of representation which is as much assimilative and relativist as 'dialectical'. Generalisable political interests are immobilised by the self-censorship of white, male, middle-class guilt. As such, *State of the Art* is to be judged as a series that has made real advances in its intellectual disregard for the 'transmission problem' and yet is as prey to the formulaic as any other documentary mode. In the acknowledgement of such a gap lies the basis for future critical initiatives.

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<sup>15</sup> John Wyver, 'Television and Postmodernism', *ICA Documents 5: Postmodernism*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**RICHARD ALLEN** is currently a doctoral candidate in the department of Theatre, Film and Television at UCLA. . . . **SUSAN BOYD-BOWMAN** teaches Film and Television in the Drama department of the University of Bristol. . . . **JAMES COLLINS** is Assistant Professor in the Communications and Theatre department of the University of Notre Dame. . . . **BARBARA CREED** lectures in Film at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, where she is also researching a doctoral dissertation on the horror film. . . . **LAWRENCE GROSSBERG** teaches Communications and Cultural Studies at the University of Illinois. He is co-author (with Stuart Hall and Jennifer Daryl Slack) of *Cultural Studies* (forthcoming) and is currently completing a study of US popular culture entitled *Another Boring Day in Paradise*. . . . **PATRICIA MELLENCAMP** teaches in the Art History department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is co-editor of the American Film Institute collection on feminist film criticism, *Re-Vision*. . . . **JOHN ROBERTS** is a freelance art critic and lecturer. He has written extensively for a number of magazines and journals here and abroad, including *Art Monthly*, *Art-tribute*, *Parachute*, *Parachute*, *City Limits* and *Cahiers Musée National d'art Moderne*.